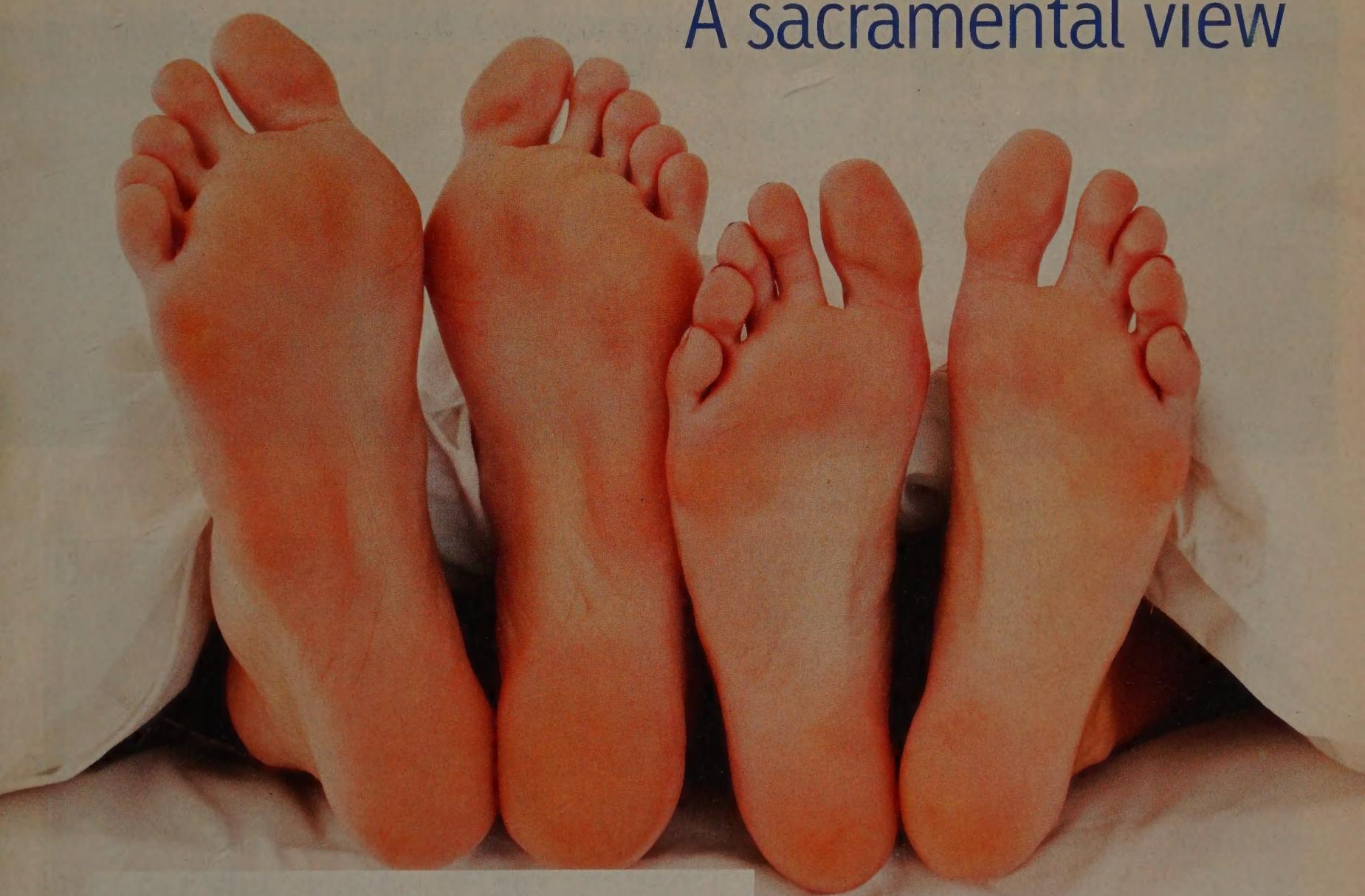


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## SEX A sacramental view



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## Scenes of grief

**NEWS OF** Reynolds Price's death on January 20 prompted me to revisit several of my favorite books by him. Price taught at Duke University and wrote novels, poetry and essays that deal with religion and theological themes. Raised a Methodist in rural North Carolina, he called himself an "unorthodox nonchurchly believer." In *Three Gospels*, Price paraphrases Mark and John as well as his own gospel, "An Honest Account of a Memorable Life: An Apocryphal Gospel." In *A Serious Way of Wondering: The Ethics of Jesus Imagined*, Price reflects on Jesus and three moral issues: suicide, homosexuality and the plight of women in a male-dominated culture.

At the age of 51, when he was at the top of his game, Price was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer of the spine. He was told that surgery and follow-up radiation might save his life but leave him a paraplegic—which they did. He wrote about his experiences in a book that I recommend to all ministers and physicians: *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*. Later, a lecture he gave at Auburn Seminary was published as *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* In it, Price replies to a letter from a young medical student who has what appears to be a terminal disease; the student is asking the questions in the subtitle.

Suffering is one of the constants in my four decades of ministry with four congregations. Innocent people suffer, babies are stillborn, bad things happen to good people. I don't think a week has gone by without someone asking what Price calls "the world's most frequent and pointless question in the face of disaster—'Why? Why me?'"

In this issue, Deanna Thompson describes how the traditional, well-meant responses to human suffering simply don't stand up to rational reflection ("Suffering through Lent," p. 12). I learned this when I was only six weeks into my student pastorate. I had been to exactly one funeral—when I was seven years old—and had otherwise never been remotely close to mortality. But suddenly Johnny Johnson died, I was a pastor, and Pearl Johnson had collapsed in grief in my arms wailing, "Why? Why? Why?"

This or similar scenes of grief happen every day of every week. There are no simple answers. Thompson leads her students in discussion of the Christian perspective on suffering with the help of Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding* and its consideration of Christianity's contention that God journeys to the depth of human suffering in the death of Jesus.

In my work, I have been helped by people who have experienced terrible suffering and loss and have written about it thoughtfully and courageously: Martin Marty in *A Cry of Absence*, Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Lament for a Son* and Burton Cooper in *Why, God?* I keep those books close at hand. My experience is that a pastor/preacher needs to raise the subject, name it honestly and proclaim the gospel in the face of it.

Price had a vision of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee promising him forgiveness of his sins and healing. When he learned that he needed yet more surgery, he prayed: "Over to you: brace me for it—whatever it is—and thanks for the interesting overtime."

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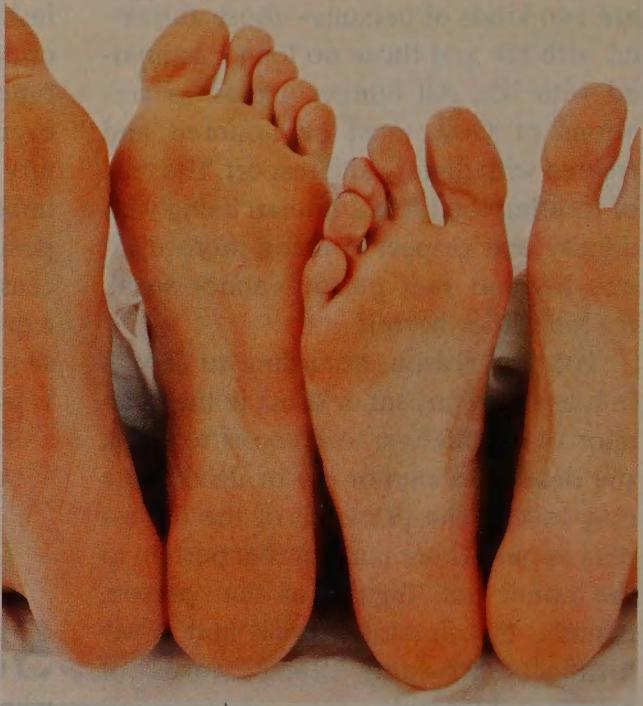
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## Truth-telling at funerals

In light of Michael A. King's "Naming the shadows: Truth-telling at funerals" (Feb. 8), let me offer a Jewish perspective. In the Jewish tradition there are two kinds of persons—those animated with life and those no longer animated with life. All human beings, as creations of God, must be honored and treated with dignity and respect. The task of treating the lifeless human being with dignity and respect is made more difficult because that person cannot speak for himself or herself.

For this reason, according to Jewish law, one may not eat or drink in the presence of the lifeless; to do so is to mock the dead who cannot eat or drink. One may talk in the presence of the lifeless person only about matters that pertain to the honor and dignity of that person, namely, the funeral service and other arrangements—and surely words of prayer and lament.

One may not speak ill of the dead not because the lifeless person was perfect when alive (no one on all the earth is without sin), but because he or she cannot respond. The lifeless person cannot take criticism and learn from it, cannot respond and explain his or her behavior or present heretofore unknown facts that might refute the criticism or place it in a different perspective. Living humans have the obligation to stand for the honor and the dignity of the lifeless one who is now mute.

It is not the purpose of a eulogy to provide an evaluation of someone's life as if it were an exit interview in the workplace or a support-group activity. It is not the purpose of a eulogy for human beings, who are themselves imperfect, to stand before others in the presence of the silent, defenseless, lifeless person and talk negatively about or render judgment upon that person. That is the task of God.

How do children provide the honor due a parent when that parent did some really horrible things? In the Jewish tra-

dition, the family gathers in the sequestered setting of the home for seven days after burial so that together, possibly with the help of a few others, they can fashion a useful, though incomplete, understanding of the deceased. The funeral service as a public, religious event is intended to pay honor and dignity due to all persons created in the image of God. Its purpose is to draw a positive lesson or two from the deceased's life that others can use and to express and deepen our sense of the sanctity of life itself. To do anything else is presumptuous.

*Rabbi Yehiel Poukpo  
Jewish Federation of Metropolitan  
Chicago  
Chicago, Ill.*

**S**hortly after the holidays I was asked to conduct the funeral of a woman who had been a member of a church I previously served. It was known that she had had many emotional problems and had tried to take her life several times in the past. Close friends told me that there was good reason to believe she had succeeded this time.

In an effort to "name the shadow" at the service, I began to talk about the necessity of facing the tragedy with courage. The widowed husband stopped me in mid-sentence: "Who told you that? Where did you get that from?" In an effort to keep my composure, I assured him and the gathering that my intent was to help everyone move past the pain of loss by facing the circumstance head-on, and so I continued with what I had prepared.

In speaking with some of the woman's friends following the service I got the unmistakable feeling that while I had shed light on the elephant in the room, it probably hadn't accomplished what I was after.

I have lived these past several weeks with the conviction that, regardless of my intention, my approach was totally inap-

propriate. The husband called me to task on his Facebook page. I offered a sincere apology for causing pain to him and his family, but not for what I said, which I still believe to be the truth.

Michael King's article has put an entirely new light on my experience. While I'm willing to confess to an insensitivity to the people present at the funeral service and to admit that I might have approached the circumstances better, at least I know that my heart was leading me in the right direction.

*Karl R. Kraft  
Glassboro, N.J.*

**K**ing correctly points out that eulogies that focus entirely on the positive often come off as phony and as such reflect poorly on the pastor and the church. However, as he admits, when it comes to speaking of the "shadow side" of the deceased, it is not easy to figure out how to do so. The eulogy is an opportunity to address both the emotional needs of those who grieve and the theological questions raised by life and death. In addition, it is an occasion for making clear how the story of this particular person is part of the larger story of what God has done, is doing and yet will do.

This certainly requires telling the truth, but there are many ways to do so. Listening closely to the loved ones of the deceased can often yield clues to what needs saying and even how to say it. Just as one must take care not to "pretend that the deceased had no need of forgiveness," one must also take care not to be too harsh. The advice of poet Emily Dickinson comes to mind: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant."

*James Benedict  
Union Bridge, Md.*

**Michael A. King responds:**

Karl R. Kraft grasps the intent of my comments. He also heartrendingly high-

*(Continued on page 49)*

March 22, 2011

# The union struggle

**L**abor unions, wrote Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, are “an indispensable element in social life . . . indeed a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice.” Having seen how Poland’s workers fared under capitalism and communism, John Paul knew firsthand that neither the market nor the state can be counted on to automatically deliver justice for workers.

Labor unions in the U.S. played a huge role in improving workers’ salaries, benefits and working conditions and thereby in helping to build a strong middle class. Since the 1940s, however, unions have fallen on hard times. In the face of global economic competition and increased corporate resistance to unions (and some laws that support that resistance), the number of unionized workers in the private sector has fallen from 33 percent to 7 percent.

The current economic crisis has prompted state officials in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere to try to further undermine the power of unions in the one arena in which they remain relatively strong—among public employees. In Wisconsin, for example, Governor Scott Walker, citing the state’s budget problems, has pressed for passage of a bill that would not only require state workers to contribute more toward their pensions and health care but would strip them of the right to negotiate benefits and working conditions. The unions have accepted the need for increased contributions but have defied the effort to take away the right to collective bargaining, since to allow that step would be to accept the dismantling of the unions.

Whatever one thinks about public employee unions, it’s inaccurate to blame them for the fiscal crisis in the states and misguided to use the crisis as the occasion to dismantle them. Budget woes are afflicting states that don’t deal with public employee unions as well as those that do. And it was not public unions that caused the wild speculation on housing prices, the Wall Street meltdown, the recession, the double-digit unemployment and the subsequent drop in tax revenues.

It’s true that some states have offered government employees generous retirement benefits while deferring the funding of those benefits to another day. That is a budget liability that has to be addressed either through an increase in taxes or a decrease in benefits. But historically there has been a logical reason to offer good benefits to government workers—their benefits package helps compensate for their low pay relative to comparable jobs in the private sector. And according to a report by the Economic Policy Institute, even with their good benefits, Wisconsin’s state workers get less in total compensation than private-sector workers with a comparable education. The attack on public unions could deliver a virtual knockout blow to the union movement, and that would be a blow to all workers. For all their flaws, unions are still an indispensable element in social life, and the voice of workers is a vital counterweight to the voice of corporate and managerial power.

**For all their flaws, unions are an indispensable element in social life.**

# CENTURY marks

**DREAM ON:** Last summer, when Isabel Castillo told Virginia governor Bob McDonnell that she had graduated from college in three and a half years with a 4.0 grade point average, the governor responded that the state needed more people like Castillo. Then she told the governor, "But I'm undocumented." Castillo, who came to this country when she was just six years old, went on to ask McDonnell to support the Dream Act, a bill that would make it possible for undocumented immigrants with college degrees to become U.S. citizens. The governor was not persuaded: "People who come here illegally need to be detained, prosecuted and deported," he said (*New York Times*, February 20).

**ACADEMIC TITHE:** Troubled by world poverty, Toby Ord founded Giving What We Can, a philanthropic collective mostly for academics. It oper-

ates with two rules: give generously and give effectively. Ord, a philosophy researcher at Oxford who makes \$52,000 a year, has recruited some academic heavyweights, like controversial bioethicist Peter Singer of Princeton University. The 80-some members of the collective have pledged to donate at least 10 percent of their annual pretax income. Ord says that where you give is as important as whether you give. Some graduate students at Rutgers University have started an American chapter of Giving What We Can (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 13).

### SOMEONE HAS TO DO IT:

Preachers have a demanding job description, says David G. Buttrick, who taught preaching at Vanderbilt University. They can't just take a text and say, "Here's what the Bible says." They have to remember that much time

has passed since the original text was written. What preachers say about a text should be in conversation with the discussion that has arisen about it over the years. And they have to translate the text into contemporary meaning and "turn our half-formed understandings into words designed to form in congregational consciousness." It's a daunting task (*Interpretation*, January).

**TRUE METAPHOR:** Modern commentators on Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming to life (Ezek. 37:1-14) say it is a metaphor for Israel's exile and restoration. But there is a long tradition of both Jewish and Christian exegetes who claim that it is a metaphor for the resurrection of the dead. Might it be both? Steven S. Tuell cites Rabbi Judah from the Babylonian Talmud and says it is a "true metaphor," perhaps even what Jesus called a parable. Ezekiel's vision of dry bones does refer to the historical exile and restoration of Israel, but, argues Tuell, it is too powerful an image to be restricted to that historical incident (*Theology Today*, January).

**PEACE IS THE WAY:** Gene Sharp, an intellectual little known outside peace activist circles, served as an inspiration to the nonviolent protests that brought down the Mubarak regime in Egypt. Arguing from an empirical analysis of history, Sharp has long maintained that nonviolent strategies provide the best means of bringing down tyrannical regimes and that nonviolent resistance has played a bigger role than most historians have acknowledged. If the protesters had used violence, they would have likely been crushed by the Mubarak regime. Sharp's book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* can be downloaded from the website of

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GUESS WHO GETS TO MAKE "SHARED SACRIFICES"

the Albert Einstein Institution (*Scientific American*, February 11).

**JOKEY AROUND:** While religion played a role in the Egyptian protests (see p. 10), so did humor. The garbage pile that accumulated in Tahrir Square was labeled the National Democratic Party headquarters—the name of Hosni Mubarak's party. After the vice president accused the protesters of having foreign agendas, youth started showing up with blank notebooks, proclaiming to each other, "Whoops, I left my 'agenda' at home." One woman, in an e-mail, likened Mubarak's reign to a long, loveless marriage: "After 30 years with my husband I feel like I need a new start, but he doesn't feel the same way, and now I can't get rid of him." The humor built camaraderie among the protesters and provided a safe means of defying the regime (*The Atlantic*, February).

**STAYING PUT:** Christian clergy in Libya said they have no intention of leaving the country, where protests against Muammar Gaddafi and retaliation by government armed forces have left hundreds of people dead. Religious sisters working in hospitals in the eastern coastal region of Libya were busy treating those wounded in clashes. The Catholic Church is the largest Christian body in Libya, but there are also Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and Pentecostal churches (ENews).

**HEARD THIS BEFORE?** Walter Russell Mead likens the Tea Party movement to Jacksonian populism, a recurrent theme in American politics. This kind of populism is skeptical of the elites and of elite institutions, especially during times of economic stress. While the Tea Party itself may splinter and fade, the impulses behind it will remain, says Mead. There is no consensus within the Tea Party, especially on foreign affairs. The Sarah Palin faction wants a strong response to terrorism in the Middle East and is an ardent supporter of the state of Israel. The Ron Paul branch tends to be isolationist and wants to keep its distance from Israel. The Tea Party is also divided over free trade—the agrarians favor it, those from

**"In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it."**

— Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, speaking to an assembly at West Point on the inadvisability of the U.S. fighting more wars like those in Afghanistan and Iraq (*New York Times*, February 25)

manufacturing regions oppose it (*Foreign Affairs*, March/April).

**SELF-POLICING:** A suit filed last month by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Council on American-Islamic Relations charges that the FBI targeted Muslims in Southern California for surveillance based solely on their religious affiliation, violating their constitutional rights. Information collected by a paid informant helped the FBI start a case against one mosque member, but that case collapsed. The operation ended when members of the Muslim communities of Southern California reported the informant to the police (RNS).

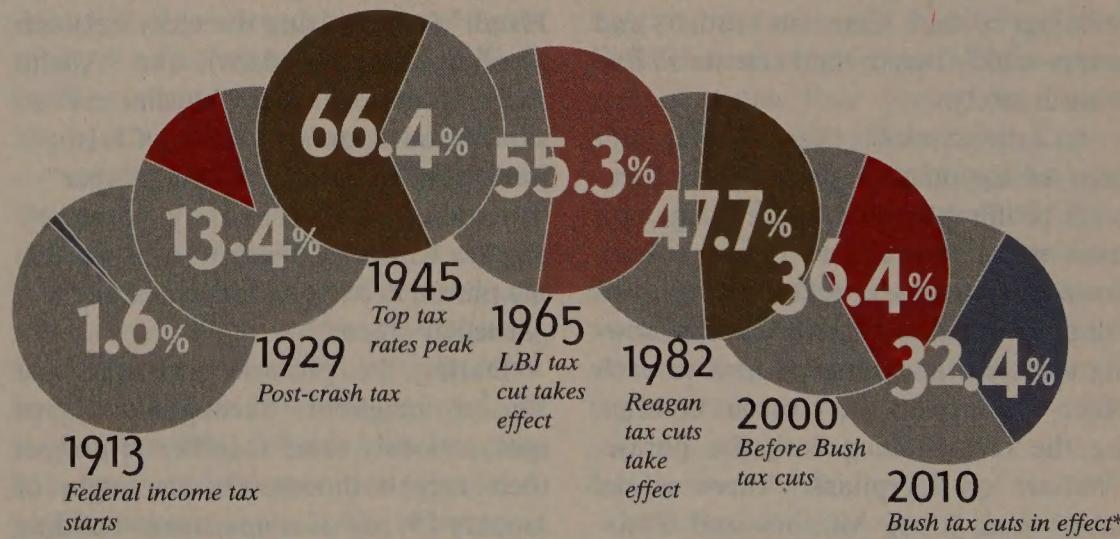
**SHADY BUSINESS:** A 2006 study of trees in New York City concluded that trees saved the city roughly \$28 million annually, or about \$47.63 per tree in ener-

gy savings. Each tree also removed about 1.73 pounds of air pollutants, saving the city more than \$5 million, and trees reduced the amount of stormwater runoff by nearly 900 million gallons each year, for a saving of an additional \$35.6 million. Trees add to property values and reduce stress. Hospital patients who could watch a tree out their window were discharged a day earlier than others, and shopping areas with trees had more customers than those that didn't (*Wilson Quarterly*, Winter).

**PRAYER LIST:** A former military chaplain has set up a website (arfg.org) encouraging people to "adopt a terrorist for prayer." The site lists 165 terrorists, including Osama bin Laden, who can be prayed for. The list of terrorists comes mostly from the FBI and the State Department (CNN.org).

## TOP TAX RATES

Effective tax rate for a head of household earning the equivalent of **\$1 million** of noninvestment income in 2010 dollars:



Source: The Tax Foundation and the Center for Responsive Politics (via motherjones.com)

\*The **ten wealthiest** members of the U.S. Congress (seven Democrats, three Republicans) voted to **continue** the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy.

Egypt's interfaith revolution

# Muslims and Copts together

by Paul-Gordon Chandler

## UNLIKE THE OTHER

Middle Eastern countries experiencing popular uprisings, Egypt has a significant indigenous historic Christian presence, and Christians make up about 10 percent of the population. Perhaps one of the chief ramifications of the protests that overthrew Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was the way religious divisions were set aside in the process.

The groundwork for the interfaith element of the protests was laid after a bomb exploded on New Year's Eve outside a prominent Coptic church in Alexandria. Twenty-three people were killed instantly and more than 90 were seriously wounded. While this act of terrorism was meant to spark increased sectarian tension, it instead led to a movement throughout Egypt in which Muslims expressed their sorrow to Christians. Six days later, when Coptic Christians across the country celebrated Christmas, thousands of Muslims attended the services with them to show their solidarity. At church after church, Muslims formed human chains of protection around the buildings so their Christian brothers and sisters could observe their Christmas Eve mass in safety.

As a direct result of the bombing, millions of Egyptians replaced their Facebook profile photos with the image of a cross within a crescent. In the streets, posters and bumper stickers were passed out all over Cairo and Alexandria showing the cross and crescent next to each other—often with the crescent embracing the cross—along with the phrase, “We are all Egyptians.” Three weeks later, when young Muslims and Christians took to the streets in antigovernment protests, this interfaith solidarity was still evident.

One of the most moving of images in the media coverage was of a Coptic church service that Muslims helped arrange and which was held in Tahrir Square to honor those killed in the uprising. Even members of the conservative Muslim Brotherhood assisted as they protected the entrances to the square.

During the uncertain days of the protest, not a single church or synagogue (which are normally protected by machine-gun-bearing police) in the country was targeted. Christians were in no way threatened. In contrast, remarkable accounts emerged of Muslims protecting churches from the possibility of looting. A Muslim friend of mine takes great pride

## During the protests, Muslims helped protect churches from potential looting.

The service was conducted in a way to be sensitive to both faiths. For example, Jesus was addressed as both Yesua al-Masih (“Jesus the Messiah”) and Isa ibn Maryam (“Isa, the son of Mary,” the preferred Islamic title). The Christian leaders conducting the service called on all to pray together and love each other. These proclamations led the Muslim protesters present to chant “Eid Wahida, Eid Wahida,” meaning “One Hand, One Hand!” (emphasizing the unity between Muslims and Christians), and “Allahu Akbar” (the distinctive Muslim confession, “God is great!”). Even Christians joined in chanting “Allahu Akbar”—something not frequently done by Egypt’s Christian minority, even though the phrase at its core doesn’t belong to a particular creed.

During the protests, Christian and Muslim neighbors throughout Egypt spontaneously came together to protect their neighborhoods. On the night of January 29, my own apartment building was assaulted nine times by mobs of armed looters, and each time we were protected by Muslim neighbors.

in saying he helped guard the historic fifth-century Hanging Church in Old Cairo, a site sacred to Coptic Christians.

One of the most encouraging images of what could be a “new Egypt” has been the spontaneous massive clean-up campaign taking place around the country in which Christians and Muslims from every segment of society are participating on a volunteer basis, working together to clean up and rebuild their cities.

**W**estern Christians can help Egyptians walk the long hard road to a peaceful democracy that respects human rights by making their own effort to counter widespread Islamophobia. Western media have begun to demonize the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a group that not only renounced violence many years ago but has advocated publicly for the rights of Egypt’s Christian minority.

The Cairo church I serve, St. John’s, has used the arts as a medium to build bridges between Christians and Muslims. The church’s Caravan Festival of the Arts ([www.oncaravan.org](http://www.oncaravan.org)) was original-

ly scheduled for the first week of February, and it was expected to bring together 45 premier Muslim and Christian artists. This arts festival—with the theme “My Neighbor”—had to be postponed due to the uprising, but many of the artists joined the protests in Tahrir Square. That number included Mohamed Abla, the country’s premier contemporary artist, and the actor Khalid Abdalla, star of the film *The Kite Runner*, who courageously remained on the square for 18 days. Other scheduled artists, such as the Iranian-American writer Reza Aslan, sought out U.S. media to make their witness for interfaith harmony.

Many Egyptian Christians were disappointed by the cautious and guarded response to the protests expressed by Christian leaders. The Coptic pope, Shenouda III, issued an endorsement of President Mubarak and publicly forbade Coptic Christians from participating in the protests. “The things that are happening now are against God’s will,” he said on national television. Some official Coptic Orthodox representatives were visible in the pro-Mubarak rallies organized on behalf of the government. Some Coptic bishops publicly condemned the “spirit of insurgency” within their church’s youth.



**SIGN OF THE TIMES:** A protester in Tahrir Square in Cairo carries a sign that affirms the multireligious character of Egypt. The protests brought down the 30-year regime of President Hosni Mubarak.

and they speak of preparing to suffer martyrdom.

But many others think this is an unnecessary overreaction. It is important to remember that the Muslim Brotherhood renounced violence many years ago

of 84, he returned to Egypt following Mubarak’s ouster and spoke to a crowd of more than a million gathered in the square.

In his sermon al-Qaradawi struck themes of democracy and pluralism, long hallmarks of his writing and preaching. Interestingly, he began his sermon by saying he was discarding the customary opening “Oh Muslims” in favor of “Oh Muslims and Copts”—a reference to Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority. He praised Muslims and Christians for standing together in Egypt’s revolution and highlighted how Christians protected their Muslim compatriots while they prayed in Tahrir Square. He even lauded the Coptic faithful who once fought against the Roman and Byzantine empires. “I invite you to bow down in prayer together,” he said. The pluralistic emphasis in his sermon highlighted the new interfaith worldview of the young audience standing before him.



## The Muslim Brotherhood has advocated for the rights of Egypt’s Christians.

This was a profound miscalculation. Thousands of young Copts disregarded their pope’s comments and joined the protests with their Muslim brothers and sisters.

**S**ome Egyptian church authorities have expressed concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood and its possible increasing influence in shaping the new Egypt. Many of the country’s Christians fear that they will be marginalized in the end and that the objectives of the revolution, started by the youth, will be hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood. Some Christian leaders have begun to talk about the possibility that Egypt will become an Islamic state like Iran,

(hence it has been denounced by al-Qaeda) and has advocated for the rights of Egypt’s Christian minority. The Muslim Brotherhood is known for its pleas for reform, for an independent judiciary and for political, civil and religious liberties.

During the recent Day of Victory on February 18, the one-week anniversary celebration of the ouster of Mubarak, Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Sunni cleric who has been exiled from Egypt since 1961, delivered his first public sermon in his homeland in 50 years. A popular television cleric whose program reaches an audience of tens of millions worldwide, al-Qaradawi is an inspiration to the Muslim Brotherhood. At the age

Paul-Gordon Chandler is rector at St. John’s Church/Maadi in Cairo and is the author of *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths* ([www.paulgordonchandler.com](http://www.paulgordonchandler.com)).

# Suffering through Lent

by Deanna A. Thompson

**WHEN ASH** Wednesday arrived in 2009, I couldn't muster the courage to go to church. The thought of having one of our pastors make the sign of the cross on my forehead and say, "You are dust and to dust you shall return" was more than I could handle. The reminder of our mortality certainly has its place; it wakes us up and calls us to attend to the preciousness and fleetingness of life on earth. But in 2009, my recently diagnosed stage IV cancer had already reduced two of my vertebrae to dust, and I feared that the rest of me wasn't far behind.

What was on my immediate "to do" list was to learn how to *live* with stage IV cancer. I spent the month after my diagnosis resigning from virtually every aspect of my life: chairing my department, speaking at various places, leading different events at our church and volunteering at my daughters' schools. The only assignment from which I didn't resign was my spring theology course.

Holding on to this one aspect of life became integral to my slow steps toward healing. During the first month of class, teaching was the only activity that got me out of bed and dressed for the day. Outside the classroom, my colleagues lovingly and graciously encouraged me. Inside the classroom I was blessed with one of the most mature, inquisitive and good-natured groups of students I'd had in a long time. The students' enthusiastic engagement with me and with the theology we studied reassured me that cancer had not invaded every part of my life.

In a typical semester, my personal life makes regular appearances in the classroom—not just because I like to talk about myself, but because getting personal is part of our religion department's pedagogical approach. We don't just

teach religion; we also practice it. In the dual role of scholar and practitioner we seek to model for our students how the study of religion can positively shape a life of faith and vice versa.

But in a department where faculty represent multiple faith traditions (Jewish, Buddhist and Christian) we also stress that we are not acknowledging our experiences as practitioners of faith for purposes of proselytizing or to coerce our students into thinking or practicing as we do. Instead, illustrations from our lives serve the larger goal of understand-

pointed to the need to know there's a reason for the suffering; others suggested that if God is all-powerful and involved in our lives, then suffering and God have to be linked.

After affirming these views as representative of many people's faith, I paused. "But do you buy this view?" I asked. Some nodded, familiar with this view of God and the worldview that supports it. Others looked skeptical.

"Certainly most of us can look back on difficult times in our lives and see that we have become stronger because of

## The classroom had been a "cancer-free" zone. But I knew that had to change.

ing religious traditions from the inside out, through the lens of persons committed to its practice.

**T**his semester I was reluctant to get personal. My life was overrun by cancer—except in the classroom. Theology class had become the only place where cancer seemingly didn't reach, and I wasn't eager to disturb the "cancer-free" environment.

As we approached the topic of theodicy, however, I sensed that my cancer would soon make an appearance. We began with a review of the most common explanations of God's relationship to suffering. We looked first at the "hard times make you strong" line of thinking. In this view, God sends trials and suffering our way to build character and make us stronger.

The class discussed why some people embrace this response. Several students

them. Sometimes challenges are good and help us grow," I encouraged them.

"But do the hard times always lead to growth?"

The room fell silent.

"Is God responsible for sending people suffering that robs them of their dignity? For the pain that strips them clean?"

It was time.

"As some of you know," I continued hesitantly, "I've been dealing with cancer over the past few months"—I had opened the door. Now I needed to walk through it—"and some people have taken this approach with me, suggesting God has given me cancer to make me a stronger person."

"Personally, I don't buy it. Living with cancer sucks, frankly, and I have a hard time believing in a God who sends people cancer or other terminal illness in order to teach them a lesson. This view

simply does not acknowledge the full scope of suffering that pervades many of our lives."

In speaking this final sentence, my voice began to shake, and I knew I was fast approaching my limit of personal disclosure for the day. So I did what teachers do when they reach an impasse: I asked another question.

"Why might those who suffer find this view of God and suffering inadequate?"

The students knew we were getting somewhere. They jumped in, suggesting that while God might be all powerful, scripture also emphasizes God's love, and a God whose love knows no bounds seems at serious odds with a God who wills cancer, AIDS, earthquakes and other sources of death and destruction on us.

Toward the end of class, we considered the theological response to suffering proposed by Daniel Migliore's book *Faith Seeking Understanding*. Migliore calls for a biblical response to God and suffering that was more thorough than the other theories we'd reviewed. He proposes a portrait of God that focuses on God's journey to the depths of human suffering, pain and alienation in the death of Jesus.

Migliore argues that Christians stand in the biblical story and are called to look at God's relationship to suffering through the lens of Jesus' life, in which God takes suffering into God's very being but refuses to let death have the last word. God brings new life out of the tragic death of Jesus, but not as a lesson about suffering or as some guarantee that suffering can be avoided. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God takes on human sin and suffering, ultimately overcoming them through the gift of new life.

Migliore ends his chapter on God and suffering with the insistence that in the face of real, deep experiences of suffering, theories are simply not enough. Faith involves a relationship with a God who suffers with us and refuses to leave it—or us—unredeemed.

Deanna A. Thompson teaches religion at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

As class came to a close, I could tell some of my students were on board with Migliore's view. Other students didn't buy it. For them, claiming allegiance to a God who ultimately overcomes suffering and death was just not enough.

One student suggested that Christian faith is ultimately a kind of wager. In faith Christians wager that God accompanies us in our suffering and that through Christ, God promises that sin,

death and destruction will not triumph in the end. For some of my students, such a wager was too big of a gamble. For others, it seemed a grandiose claim lacking in sufficient evidence.

But other students—like me—were willing to stake their lives on it. I headed back to my office, realizing that I had started to embrace the season of Lent, a season that offers not just ashes but also the hope that Easter will come soon. CC

## Standing with Alyosha

"Alyosha stood at the crossroads under the streetlamp."

Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

It's a place of darkness where  
a human will might do its best work,  
where kindness becomes flesh  
or deflates like a blow-up Santa  
come New Year's. It might be  
the snug, well-insulated house,  
green lawn groomed, minivan shining  
bright in the garage, abuse lurking  
in some airless bedroom corner. Or  
it might be the stinking deathbed,  
the anguished, desperate jail cell,  
where Alyosha blesses this  
brother's innocence or that  
one's best intentions, absorbing  
the worst the world wills him. Still  
he chooses to kiss the tortured Ivan and,  
if stories had a doorway, Ivan's  
Grand Inquisitor, too, for,  
in the end, it's freely given love  
the withered, aging lips  
long for. At this crossroads  
Jesus kneels before a cowering  
prostitute, her breasts bare. He  
sticks his finger in the dirt,  
sketches what shames them all  
but not her, no, judges not  
to shame her, says instead,  
"Go ahead, throw a stone,  
you men who have no sin."  
It's the place of darkness  
at crossroads everywhere,  
offering bewildered travelers  
light enough to glimpse  
the willing figure love makes or  
the long, shivering shadow of its retreat.

Mark Hiskes

## Gay cause leads in PCUSA voting

by John Dart

News Editor

**M**ore than halfway through the balloting by regional presbyteries, a proposal to permit ordination of openly gay and lesbian pastors in the nation's largest Presbyterian denomination holds a lead.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) last year approved dropping the ban on gay clergy by a 373-323 vote, but ratification by a majority of PCUSA's regional units, or presbyteries, is required to make the change. Three similar attempts to adopt the proposal have failed in the last 14 years.

As of March 1, the unofficial tally was 55 yes, 40 no and one tie. The proposed amendment would need a total of 87 yes votes from the 173 presbyteries for approval. At present, candidates for ministry are barred if they cannot vow chastity in singleness and fidelity in heterosexual marriage.

Advocates for lifting that bar to ordination were cheered in February by the number of presbyteries switching sides. Twelve presbyteries that were opposed to gay candidates in 2009 voted in favor this time, whereas only one presbytery switched from yes to no in the same period.

"So far, the majority of Presbyterians are voting to return to the tradition of rooting ordination in a person's call from God and their gifts to engage in ministry," said Janet Edwards, co-moderator of the advocacy group More Light Presbyterians.

Pam Byers, executive director of Covenant Network, a group favoring passage of the proposal, cautioned against celebrating victory prematurely. She

noted that of the first 46 presbyteries voting yes, three decided by a one-vote margin and one by a margin of two votes. One presbytery came to a tie vote, which counts as a no vote.

Presbyterians on both sides of the issue have despaired over the seemingly unending debates on the issue at the national and local levels of the Louisville, Kentucky-based denomination.

While some conservative "renewal" groups have worked to maintain what they describe as biblically based Christian standards, some congregations and church members have left the PCUSA to link up with the conservative Presbyterian Church in America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or independent congregations.

**I**n recent months, members of a new group, tentatively named the Fellowship and led by pastors opposed to gay clergy and to liberal social and theological views, have talked about enlisting "like-minded" Presbyterians to leave behind the "rancorous, draining internal disputes that paralyze our common life and ministry" and form a fellowship focused on missions reflecting "classic biblical, Reformed/evangelical traditions."

A stir was caused by the group's February 2 statement, written by a seven-man steering committee and affirmed initially by three dozen other ministers, including pastors of nine of the denomination's 15 largest congregations.

Describing the PCUSA as "deathly ill" and unlikely to survive on its present course, the Fellowship laid out four alternative visions of independence—from a loose affiliation within the denomination to a new Reformed entity.

"We hate the appearance of schism, but the PCUSA is divided already," said

organizers of the Fellowship. A meeting set for August 25-27 in Minneapolis would try "to find a new path forward," according to John Crosby, senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church, Edina, Minnesota.

"A growing number of orthodox/evangelical/centrist folks have become disenchanted with the divisive tone at the national level," Crosby said. Though "we are committed to what we see as a biblical view of sexuality," he said, "the issues of interpretation and authority extend to the uniqueness of Christian claims of salvation, the deity of Christ and bodily resurrection."

Crosby said in an e-mail interview that if a new Reformed church body were formed, "we think the PCUSA will resolve property issues, hopefully in a gracious manner that several parts of the country have already experienced."

Jack Haberer, editor of *Presbyterian Outlook*, said it was unclear whether the Fellowship could become the vehicle for a breakaway church body. Haberer recalled a period in 2004 when a number of conservative pastors decided not to be part of a separation movement, despite "enormous pressure" from congregants to bolt from the denomination. Fellowship leaders "are seriously looking at alternative ways to stay in the PCUSA," he said.

One idea is to create something akin to Catholic orders such as the Jesuits that focus on their mission while under the authority of the larger church, according to Pastor Jim Singleton of First Presbyterian Church of Colorado Springs, Colorado. "Most of us simply don't want to exit; we just want to be a different subset within the whole," he said. "A lot of us want to be connected to our historic roots."

Crosby and Singleton have been the principal planners for the Fellowship. The

other steering committee members are pastors in Atlanta, Orlando and Houston as well as Newport Beach, California, and Gig Harbor, Washington.

Would the Fellowship be seen as a haven if the gay clergy proposal passes this year? "I don't know that everybody who is opposed to ordination of homosexuals is naturally going to be interested in what we are suggesting," Singleton said. "If fact, we got criticized early on by some of our evangelical brothers because we said in our statement that we're not going to fight the gay issue anymore."

The Fellowship leaders say they remain in touch with denominational leaders on the stresses on the PCUSA's synod and presbytery structures.

Three top Presbyterian officials issued a statement on February 4 that said "this is indeed a rich time of ferment and deep discernment" in mainline denominations. Momentum toward new strategies could "inspire the transformation of congregations and the creation of new worshiping communities in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," according to the statement by Moderator Cynthia Bolbach, Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons and Mission Council Executive Director Linda Valentine.

## Budget cuts hurt poor, say religious groups

Get ready for more undernourished infants, dangerously cold homes and disease-stricken communities in developing countries if proposed federal budget cuts become law.

That's the message coming from left-to-center religious advocacy groups, who've been rallying supporters and blanketing Capitol Hill since budget debates kicked into high gear in mid-February.

Declaring budgets to be "moral documents," they're prodding lawmakers to honor their respective faith traditions by sparing poverty-related programs from the cost-cutting axe.

But efforts to save funding are meeting resistance—not only from number



RNS / COURTESY OF RYAN BEILER / SOJOURNERS

**BUDGET PROTEST:** Protesters convened by the antipoverty group *Call to Renewal* demonstrate in 2005 against the budget outside the U.S. Capitol. This year's budget again targets impoverished Americans, liberal religious groups say, and they are seeking to persuade lawmakers to spare poverty-related programs.

crunchers but also from others with different views of what constitutes moral budgeting.

The conscience-tweaking initiatives are popping up just as lawmakers work to shrink trillion-dollar annual deficits. In mid-February, 300 leaders from Catholic social ministry organizations left a Washington-area conference to lobby their representatives and senators. Sojourners, an evangelical ministry with a social justice focus, is raising money for bracelets and ads asking, "What would Jesus cut?"

"Our job is to provide the moral voice that says, 'You don't cut the poor first,'" said Kathy Saile, director of domestic social development for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "But thus far in this recession and economic crisis, the only people who've been asked to sacrifice have been the poor."

Advocates like Saile are denouncing House-passed plans to cut about \$5 billion from poverty-focused international aid, \$2.3 billion from affordable housing, \$1.75 billion from job training, \$1 billion from community health centers, \$900 million from refugee programs and \$390 million from low-income heating assistance.

Under current proposals, programs

that target poor people would face cuts of much deeper proportion than other areas of the budget, according to Stephen Colecchi, director of the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace.

Moral arguments aren't just niceties for lawmakers to consider once the hard-nosed economic analyses are done, according to Wayne Fields, executive director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion & Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. On the contrary, he said, budget pressures and religious lobbying efforts can help reveal a public figure's depth of commitment.

"It's a test of how serious our politicians are when they declare their commitments to religious values and to faith communities," Fields said. "It's a test of how much they actually listen when those communities witness to the deepest moral and ethical concerns of the faith."

Others, however, see a different moral imperative: fighting wasteful spending. The 1-million-member TeaParty.org group encourages "traditional family values" and calls for an end to federal deficits. Its president, Dale Robertson, says government-funded antipoverty programs are vulner-

able to fraud and abuse in the absence of sufficient accountability.

For example, he cites the scandal-plagued Global Fund, which receives taxpayer dollars for overseas projects and recently reported \$34 million missing. "It's wrong, it's uncharitable and it's unchristian to give good money after bad," Robertson said. "It's almost like you're destroying this nation because you're not solving the problems.... Until we begin to hold [programs] accountable, cut everything."

[Church World Service has joined several other humanitarian agencies in appealing to House leaders in a February 22 letter saying the nation's proposed spending plan for 2011 would severely curtail U.S. relief efforts. The letter posed a scenario in which "in the next major global humanitarian crisis—the next Haiti, tsunami or Darfur—the United States might simply fail to show up."]

Religious advocates bristle at the suggestion that government funding implies wastefulness.

World Vision, a Christian relief organization, gets about 10 percent of its budget from the government, according to Robert Zachritz, its director of advocacy and government relations. He says poverty-focused international programs achieve strong returns on investment. Cutting poverty-focused international aid by 26 percent as proposed, he said, would hamper disaster response efforts and would remove 13 million people from feeding programs overseas.

Calls to preserve funding for poverty assistance programs are coming from a diverse swath of religious communities, including the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Hindu American Seva Charities. Yet while lobbyists hear a divine mandate, Americans on the whole don't seem convinced.

In a February survey by the Pew Research Center, global poverty assistance was the only area out of 13 categories in which more respondents called for spending cuts (45 percent) than called for a spending increase (21 percent). What's more, cuts to global poverty assistance were equally favored by Catholics, evangelicals, mainline Prot-

estants and people with no religious affiliation.

Socially conservative lobbyists are largely staying out of debates about anti-poverty programs. Groups such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family and the Traditional Values Coalition have focused efforts on defunding Planned Parenthood, an abortion provider.

People on both sides agree that if antipoverty programs suffer substantial cuts, religious organizations will bear more responsibility for feeding the hun-

gry and meeting other basic needs. But some advocates for sustaining public funding say such a backup plan is more ideological than realistic.

"Churches simply have not put in their budgets the kind of funding that would be required to feed 9 to 10 million people," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tennessee. "So it's dishonest for politicians to shift the responsibility away from the government to the church." —G. Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS

## Religious bodies oppose lower tax deductions

FOR THE third time in three years President Obama's proposed budget will attempt to reduce tax deductions for high-end charitable donors, and for the third time nonprofits and religious organizations are pushing back.

Many religious nonprofits, which supplement their budgets heavily with donations from wealthy donors, are concerned that reducing the tax write-offs for charitable donations will cause a decrease in giving, said Diana Aviv, president and CEO of Independent Sector, a coalition of nonprofit organizations.

"The question is, do tax incentives work, do they stimulate more money than they cost?" Aviv said. "Experts estimate that this proposal could reduce charitable giving by \$7 billion."

Obama's proposed budget for fiscal year 2012 includes a 30 percent reduction in itemized deductions for high-income taxpayers. Individual donors making more than \$200,000 or families earning more than \$250,000 would be able to claim just 28 percent of any donation as a tax deduction rather than the current 35 percent.

That would mean that a wealthy taxpayer who donates \$10,000 to a charity would be able to claim a deduction of only \$2,800 on his taxes, rather than \$3,500.

Obama has defended this reduction several times, most recently at a White House press conference on February 15. "When it comes to the long term, when maintaining tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires will mean additional deficits of a trillion dollars—if you're serious about deficit reduction, you don't do that," Obama said.

As in years past, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America is again a vocal opponent of Obama's plan.

"The proposal to reduce the rate of tax deductibility for contributions is a recipe for disastrous displacements and cuts in much-needed nonprofit sector institutions and services," Nathan Diament, the union's director of public affairs, said in a statement.

Several studies have researched the potential outcome of similar proposals and all concluded that there would be a decline in donations, although dollar estimates of the decline varied.

A reduction similar to the one proposed occurred between 2002 and 2003, when the top income tax deduction for donations was lowered from 38.6 percent to its current 35 percent. After that reduction, individual charitable contributions actually increased, according to the Obama administration. —Richard Yeakley, RNS

## Pro-union clergy voices enter Wisconsin debate

The pro-union rallies in Wisconsin have a retro feel to them—particularly for people of faith. At one time clergy and faith-based groups were on the front lines of the American labor movement, but priorities shifted with the rise of the religious right and the weakening of unions.

In the Wisconsin protests over Governor Scott Walker's budget proposal that would reduce collective bargaining rights for teachers and other public-sector employees, however, religious voices have reentered the fray.

Groups like Faith in Public Life and Interfaith Worker Justice have mobilized coalitions that include Protestants and Muslims, in addition to Catholics and Jews, who dominated pro-union efforts in previous generations.

Clergy led invocations and prayer vigils throughout Wisconsin, wrote letters and sent delegations to meet with Republican lawmakers. An Illinois church and synagogue even offered sanctuary to the 14 Democratic state senators who fled the state on February 16 rather than vote on the governor's bill.

Walker says proposed legislation that would limit collective bargaining rights is necessary to close a \$137 million deficit in the state's budget, a political strategy that has since spread to statehouses in Indiana and Ohio. Union supporters have responded with massive protests.

The U.S. Catholic bishops on February 24 threw their moral weight behind the pro-union protesters in Wisconsin, saying the rights of workers do not abate in difficult economic times.

"The debates over worker representation and collective bargaining are not simply matters of ideology or power," said Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, California, chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on domestic justice, "but involve principles of justice, participation and how workers can have a voice in the workplace and economy."

Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, were both ardent supporters of unions and workers' associations, Blaire said.

Interfaith Worker Justice has compiled statements affirming the right to organize from more than a dozen denominations.

"We're making this a bigger issue than just the workers involved. We're making it a moral issue, and that it's more than just fighting over pensions," said Rabbi Renee Bauer, director of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin. "We're hoping that if lawmakers hear from religious leaders, it'll help them have a change of heart."

While some conservative Christians have used biblical language to oppose labor demands, the traditional role of religion has been to support the rights of workers, said Thomas C. Kohler, a Boston College professor of labor law.

"Catholics and Jews have always taken the notion of work as being far more than instrumental," he said. "As the rabbis taught, God starts creation, but humans are given the gift of completing it. Work is a holy thing."

David L. Gregory, executive director of the Center for Labor and Employment Law at St. John's University, agreed but said the blurring of lines between social and fiscal conservatives has eroded some religious support for unions.

"Anybody identified with the Judeo-Christian tradition is making a commitment to [its] social justice dimension, but it depends on whether they're operating primarily according to their faith or according to politics," Gregory said. "Many evangelicals have increasingly been moving to the right side of the political spectrum."

The religion-labor bond began to weaken during the Vietnam War and the civil rights conflicts of the 1960s, Kohler said. Among Catholics in particular, political efforts since then have focused on abortion and other "life issues," he said.

By the time Interfaith Worker Justice formed in 1996, the ties between religion and labor had all but unraveled, said Kim Bobo, the group's founder and executive director. But as the economic downturn has taken a toll on middle-class congregations, clergy have become more aware of the need to protect fair wages and benefits. Bobo said her Chicago-based group can mobilize those sentiments into action in Wisconsin and

other states considering union-busting budget measures.

"This attack is so vicious and so wrong that we're seeing people step forward to support workers, and it has galvanized people in the religious community," she said. "It's a huge resurgence." —Nicole Neroulias, RNS

## Obama drops defense of antigay marriage law

The Obama administration has announced that it will no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act, a nearly 15-year-old law that defines marriages as heterosexual unions.

In a letter to Congress, Attorney General Eric Holder said President Obama has determined that the law, widely known as DOMA, is unconstitutional when applied to same-sex couples married legally under state law.

Holder, writing to House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio), said the decision came as he and the president reviewed the administration's role in current court challenges from legally married same-sex couples in New York and Connecticut.

The attorney general said Obama considered a number of factors, including a history of discrimination against gays and a "growing scientific consensus" that a person's sexual orientation cannot be changed.

In his February 23 statement, Holder noted the changing legal landscape since the law was passed, including Congress's repeal of the military's ban on openly gay members and the Supreme Court's declaring that laws criminalizing homosexual conduct are unconstitutional.

In a news briefing, White House press secretary Jay Carney said the president has long considered DOMA "unnecessary and unfair" but is still "grappling" with his views on gay marriage.

Family Research Council president Tony Perkins called the move "appalling" and urged Congress to defend DOMA.

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, called the administration's decision "a tremendous step toward recognizing our common humanity." —RNS

# Forgiveness expert explores religious dimension

FOR MORE than a quarter of a century, psychologist Robert D. Enright has been a pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness—the kind of guy *Time* magazine once dubbed “the forgiveness trailblazer.”

Enright has probed the mental and physical benefits that incest survivors, adult children of alcoholics, cardiac patients and others can enjoy if they choose to show mercy to those who have done them wrong.

His work has taken him to global hotspots—to a school program of “forgiveness education” for Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland and to a project to promote e-mail dialogue among Jewish, Muslim and Christian children in Israel and Palestine.

But while forgiveness carries strong associations with religion, at one time Enright supported his claims with empirical data alone, insisting that his method is usable by “theists and nontheists” alike.

The study of forgiveness has nevertheless ended up nurturing Enright’s own faith, ultimately bringing him back to the Roman Catholic Church of his youth. He is now preparing, for the first time, to make that faith explicit in his work.

Enright was not a churchgoer when he embarked on this line of research in 1985, but as he tells it, his discovery of the field that would define his career came in answer to a prayer.

Seeking to help a graduate student in search of a thesis topic, Enright decided while driving one day to ask God for a suggestion. He recalls that “one word came back: forgiveness.”

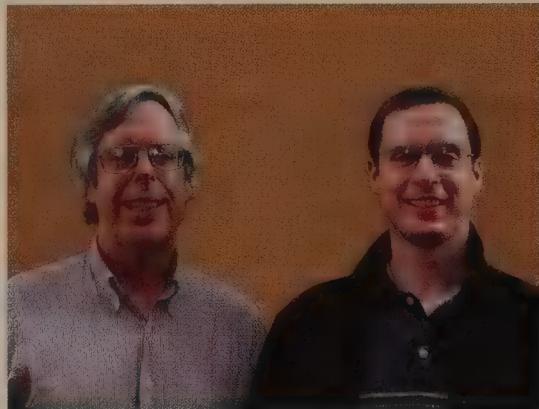
Today, at least 1,000 academic researchers and “countless therapists” specialize in forgiveness studies, Enright said, but in 1985 a library search turned up not a single piece of scholarship on the subject in any of the social sciences.

Enright found himself drawn to the subject and began leading a seminar on forgiveness at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he was a tenured professor. Among the assigned readings

for the seminar were selections from the scriptures of various religious traditions.

Those texts raised questions that led Enright back to Christianity—first to what he describes as a liberal Methodist church, then to an evangelical Protestant congregation and finally back to Catholicism.

A major turning point in both his spiritual development and his understanding of forgiveness, Enright said, was the death of his wife, Nancy, from kidney cancer in 2002. That ordeal, which left him a single father of two young boys, taught him the power of redemptive suffering.



**FAITH-BASED VISION:** Psychologist Robert D. Enright, who pioneered the scientific study of forgiveness, is pictured with his son and collaborator, philosophy student Kevin.

“Forgiveness as Redemptive Suffering” is the working title of a book that Enright will be writing with his son Kevin, 23, a recent college graduate who plans to pursue graduate studies in philosophy. The book will be Enright’s first major statement of how religious faith has informed and expanded his understanding of forgiveness.

“The Catholic Church and only the Catholic Church can tell us what forgiveness really is in the fullest sense: a uniting of your suffering with Christ’s suffering, which we bear on behalf of those who have hurt us, for their salvation,” he says.

The church has traditionally emphasized the sacramental aspect of forgiveness as something granted by God,

Enright said. But over the last three decades, especially under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, he’s seen a growing emphasis on “person-to-person forgiveness.”

That emphasis has inspired a vision that Enright calls “The Church as Forgiving Community,” which is also the title of a forthcoming book he is editing, with essays by psychologists, philosophers and theologians.

In making the case for forgiveness—including a February 28 lecture at Rome’s Pontifical University of the Holy Cross—Enright recommends measures such as parish-based discussion groups on forgiveness and forgiveness-focused religious education for children.

Enright believes that forgiveness is also an essential part of the church’s recovery from the clergy sexual abuse crisis, and he plans to raise that issue when he speaks next year at a eucharistic congress in Ireland, a country where the church has been hit especially hard by pedophilia scandals.

Anticipating passionate reactions from church critics, he stresses that forgiveness “does not mean letting bygones be bygones” or sparing abusive priests their just punishment. “But mercy tempers justice and makes it better,” Enright said, even as it helps victims themselves to heal.

Along with its internal benefits to the church, Enright said, an emphasis on person-to-person forgiveness can bring new adherents into the fold. Just as many Westerners have adopted Eastern spiritual practices such as meditation and yoga, non-Catholics who are drawn to the church’s methods of forgiveness could find themselves delving more deeply into the faith that spawned them.

“People start forgiving others and they say, ‘Hey this is good stuff, it sets me free and helps my relationships. What’s the next step?’” Enright said.

In a “pragmatic, show-me-what-works age,” forgiveness has powerful evangelical appeal, Enright said. “But this goes way beyond relaxation. It’s surgery for the heart.” —Francis X. Rocca, RNS

## Huckabee draws heat for anti-Islam remarks

Southern Baptist preacher and former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee has landed in hot water for comments critical of Islam.

In an interview on *Fox & Friends* the former Arkansas governor and potential 2012 presidential hopeful criticized two Protestant churches that opened their doors to Muslims. The churches allowed Muslims to worship in their facilities when mosques in the area were too small or under construction.

"As much as I respect the autonomy of each local church, you just wonder, what are they thinking?" Huckabee said.

"If the purpose of a church is to push forward the gospel of Jesus Christ, and then you have a Muslim group that says that Jesus Christ and all the people that follow him are a bunch of infidels who should be essentially obliterated, I have a hard time understanding that."

"I mean if a church is nothing more than a facility and a meeting place free for any and all viewpoints, without regard to what it is, then should the church be rented out to show adult movies on the weekend?" asked the former pastor and past president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Huckabee hosts a weekend program on Fox News Channel besides appearing on it as an interviewee.

The Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations called on Huckabee on February 21 to apologize for "inaccurate and offensive" comments about Islam and to meet with Muslim leaders to discuss growing Islamophobia in American society.

"On this Presidents' Day, we ask Mike Huckabee—a person who may again seek the highest office in the land—to live up to the principles of tolerance and interfaith respect that make our nation great," said CAIR national executive director Nihad Awad. "We urge Mr. Huckabee to do some research and to apologize for his inaccurate and offensive remarks." —Bob Allen, ABP

## Methodists grow abroad, continue slippage in U.S.

**WORLD MEMBERSHIP** in the United Methodist Church has risen above 12 million for the first time, but U.S. professing members dropped 1.2 percent to 7.8 million in the most recent data.

The major growth areas for the denomination are Africa and the Philippines, according to Scott Brewer, an official in the United Methodist Council on Finance and Administration.

Methodist membership in Africa, Asia and Europe grew from 3.5 million to 4.4 million in the five-year period

ending in 2009, the United Methodist News Service reported. The U.S. membership decline of 1.2 percent occurred from 2008 to 2009.

A United Methodist spokesman said the remedy for a U.S. recovery in membership is well known. "There's no future for the United Methodist Church in the U.S. unless it can demonstrate that it can reach more people, younger people and more diverse people," said Lovett H. Weems Jr. of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

## Do Christian athletes seek big-dollar contracts like everyone else?

As contract talks broke down between Albert Pujols and the Cardinals, St. Louis baseball fans began nervously asking themselves a host of questions. He's a Cardinal for life, right? He wouldn't go to Wrigley Field because he likes winning too much, right?

But a particular group of Cardinals fans—those who share his evangelical Christian faith—were asking a different kind of question: What does holding out for the largest contract in the history of baseball say about Pujols's Christian testimony?

Pujols and his wife, Deidre, are evangelical Christians. They describe their charity, the Pujols Family Foundation, as "a faith-based nonprofit organization," and they participate in Christian events around the city.

So as Pujols began looking to many like a typical megawealthy superstar athlete angling for a record payday, some observers wondered if he was tarnishing his image.

Team officials have declined to describe the details of their offer to Pujols, but it's widely believed to have been worth about \$200 million.

Darrin Patrick, pastor of The Journey, a church in St. Louis that counts a num-

ber of professional athletes as members, said Jesus warned against greed.

"Nobody really confesses to that sin," Patrick said. "Lust, anxiety—sure. But very few people say, 'I'm greedy,' and I absolutely think that [Pujols] should be on guard for that. A verse from 1 Timothy says the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

That's the fear of many people who love Pujols, both as fans and as Christians. They fear, as the author of Matthew's Gospel wrote, that no one can serve two masters. "For a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other," the Gospel says. "You cannot serve God and wealth."

Sean Michael Lucas, a former professor at Covenant Seminary in Creve Coeur, Missouri, and currently pastor of a Presbyterian church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, describes himself on his Twitter page as, among other things, "Cardinals fan, lover of Jesus."

At the end of January, Lucas tweeted, "How is AP's testimony affected if he holds the Cards hostage for \$30m/10yrs? @ what pt does 1 Tim 6:10 apply here?" In another tweet, Lucas wrote, "Unless there is a big part of this contract that goes to Pujols Foundation (\$30-50m) he's open 2 the question. Legitimately."

Baptist pastor Scott Lamb, the co-



**GOD AND MONEY:** St. Louis Cardinals' Albert Pujols celebrates as he crosses home plate with a grand slam against the Chicago Cubs. Some Christian fans wonder whether Pujols's evangelical faith conflicts with his quest for a \$200 million-plus contract.

author (with Tim Ellsworth) of a new biography called *Pujols: More Than the Game* that focuses on the first baseman's faith, said the contract talks have opened up an interesting debate in Christian circles that goes beyond baseball to the uncomfortable intersection of the New Testament and capitalism.

"Consumption mentality is very American, but it's not very biblical," Lamb said. "People are asking whether [Pujols] should grab all he can get, and what his moral responsibilities are in terms of what to do with that money."

Some pastors say the more important point for Pujols is not how many millions he makes but how he spends them. "What you do with your money is a factor," said Patrick. Pujols "has a track record of generosity that is without question. God does use money to help people, and I see God doing that with Pujols."

In 2009, Pujols visited The Crossing, a church in Chesterfield, Missouri, that claims some professional athletes as

## Hanson, WCC criticize U.S. veto of UN resolution on Israeli settlements

**PRESIDING BISHOP** Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America said he was "dismayed" that the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have condemned the illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.

Hanson and 12 other leaders of Christian churches and organizations had written to President Obama urging his administration to support the UN resolution days before the UN vote February 18. Fourteen other Security Council members voted in favor of the resolution, which was cosponsored by 130 countries.

U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice said the United States agrees with the rest of the council "about the folly and illegitimacy of continued Israeli settlement activity." But she said, as reported by Associated Press, the U.S. believes "it is unwise" for the UN's council to attempt to resolve key issues between the Israelis and Palestinians.

In his statement shortly after the UN voted, Hanson said, "I am now con-

cerned that this action will increase a despondent mood about the future of such talks and will possibly strengthen extremist voices in the region." Palestinians have said they will not resume negotiations until Israel halts settlement building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The World Council of Churches Central Committee added on February 21 its "deep concern and disappointment" at the U.S. veto during a meeting in Geneva of the WCC's main governing body. The Central Committee called the veto "a deeply regrettable mistake."

The U.S. veto, the WCC said, "contradicts the statement" made by Obama in Cairo last June that "the United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements."

John Jillions, a U.S. priest in the Orthodox Church in America, opposed the WCC statement. "There is no reference in the text [as to] why the U.S. voted against the [UN] resolution," he said, "so it is unbalanced and makes me uneasy."

members, to help the congregation launch its Advent Conspiracy program, which encourages people "to celebrate Christmas in a different way by serving those in need," according to Tony Biaggne, the church's director of creative communications.

"I've never met anyone with more passion for serving, and serving the poor, than Albert," Biaggne said.

Ultimately, many Christian Cardinals fans and others who benefit from the Pujols' largesse are praying for a big payday for No. 5 and for his generosity to continue—and even grow.

"I reject any idea that a person's Christianity should cause them to step away from what the market would demand for them," said Lamb. "Albert will go down in history as one of the great ones—someone who grabbed the money and gave it away at the same time."

—Tim Townsend, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch/RNS*

## Christchurch quake death toll rises as ruins probed

In the New Zealand city named after a place of faith, churches shattered by a 6.3-magnitude earthquake were still yielding up their dead days after the February 22 tremor as clergy and parishioners in Christchurch grieved and searched for safe places to worship.

The death toll reached 154 on February 28, with at least 50 people missing and hundreds injured. About 600 search and rescue workers looked for survivors in the central city, where several major office buildings were completely destroyed, according to media reports. Estimated damage is \$10 billion.

Rescue workers started the grim task of removing bodies from (Anglican)



**DEADLY QUAKE:** The spire of ChristChurch Cathedral (Anglican) toppled into Cathedral Square in Christchurch, New Zealand, February 22. A 6.3-magnitude earthquake collapsed buildings at the height of a busy workday, killing at least 154 people and trapping many more.

ChristChurch Cathedral as hopes of finding survivors faded, according to press reports and *Anglican Taonga*, a publication of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. A camera lowered into the damaged nave by workers showed no signs of life. The cathedral's spire crumbled in the quake, collapsing into a stone tower.

"No sound, nothing," said one rescuer. As many as 22 people are believed to have been buried in the rubble, but cathedral staff were safe. The church and spire have been a major visitor attraction.

Since many other churches were rendered inaccessible, a range of worship options being considered included schools and open-air meetings. "The bishop is working on that at the moment," said a spokesperson for Anglican bishop Victoria Matthews.

The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, the city's biggest Catholic church, was damaged beyond repair, and mass was being celebrated at the nearby cathedral college hall. Some Presbyterian and Uniting congregations were unable to meet due to extensive damage to church buildings and to surrounding roads, as well as continuing disruption to power and water supplies.

-ENInews

## Briefly noted

■ A federal judge on February 22 dismissed a lawsuit filed by Christians who argue that President Obama's health-care overhaul violates their religious freedom. The plaintiffs said they believe that God will heal them from disease and that the requirement to purchase health insurance in the new Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act forces them to demonstrate a lack of faith. The lawsuit argued that the health-care law also violates the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. But U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ruled that "it is unclear how [the new health-care law] puts substantial pressure on plaintiffs to modify their behavior and to violate their beliefs, as it permits them to pay a shared responsibility payment in lieu of actually obtaining health insurance." The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act allows Americans to pay a fine if they choose not to buy insurance, an option which all of the plaintiffs have said they will take. *Mead v. Holder* is one of several lawsuits that have challenged various portions of the new health-care law.

■ Representatives of the Episcopal Church and the two provinces of the Moravian Church in North America on February 10 formally inaugurated a full-communion

relationship with a service that blended elements of the liturgical and musical practices of both traditions. The service at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, included a newly written Liturgy for Christian Unity from the Moravian Book of Worship and an Anglican eucharistic prayer. Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and Moravian Provincial Elders Conference presidents Betsy Miller (Northern Province) and David Guthrie (Southern Province) officiated at the service.

## Deaths

■ **Peter J. Gomes**, 68, a theologian and minister at Harvard and author of the best seller *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (1996), died February 28 in a Boston hospital. Gomes fought homophobia and intolerance through his books, sermons and speeches after he came out as a gay man. A Baptist minister, Gomes was a conservative Republican for much of his life. He gave the benediction at President Ronald Reagan's second inauguration and the National Cathedral sermon at the inauguration of President George H. W. Bush. He was minister of Harvard's non-denominational Memorial Church and a professor at Harvard Divinity School. In 1991, at a rally to protest homophobia, Gomes announced that he was "a Christian who happens as well to be gay." That declaration was "a turning point for him professionally," said the *New York Times*. He lectured widely and wrote against literalistic interpretations of the Bible.

■ **Alan F. Segal**, 65, an admired scholar of early Judaism and Christian beginnings who retired in December from three decades of teaching at Barnard College, died February 13 from complications of leukemia. Among his books were *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (1986) and *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (1990). His last book, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (2004), made him a popular source for journalists writing on the topic.

# LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, March 27

Exodus 17:1-7

**TRANSLATED LITERALLY**, the Spanish word *desahogarse* means “to undrown oneself.” It refers to disclosing a story of grief or difficulty in a way that liberates the teller, or at least lightens her load. Have you traveled for days across the Sonoran Desert, skirting the barbed-wired walls and the border patrol, risking your life for the sake of your family back home, all in the hope of landing work that pays more than a few dollars a day? Then rest here awhile; tell me your story. Undrown yourself. There isn’t much water out there in the wilderness, God knows, but there are plenty of ways to be swallowed up by sorrow.

We’ve heard of the exodus, that great escape out of slavery; we’ve heard of the promised land, that home of milk of honey; and we’ve heard of the wilderness wandering that comes in between. But for the author of Exodus 17, the desert chapter in Israel’s history is more than a 40-year interlude between the drama’s beginning and end; it’s a full-blown second act in its own right. In fact, it’s arguably the center of the story.

In Act I, for example, as the Egyptian plagues come and go, God repeatedly instructs Moses to demand that the pharaoh “let my people go”—not “so they may enjoy the land of milk and honey,” but “so they may worship me in the wilderness” (Exod. 7:16). The point is to worship God; the eventual arrival at the promised land is more the denouement than the climax of Israel’s liberating adventure.

But if the point is to lead Israel out into a harsh, uninhabitable land—what’s the big idea? Why not lead these refugees directly to safety, milk and honey? Why the desert, the wandering, the long years so far from home?

In a word: training. Exercise. Formation. God visits Egypt with ten plagues, but then visits the Israelites with trials meant to form them, strengthen them, prepare them for Sinai and ultimately for Zion. One of the first and most famous trials is an experience of hunger, followed by the work of trust and poise necessary to gather only one day’s worth of manna at a time (Exod. 16)—something Christians should recall every time we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Exodus is a story of liberation, but one of the central themes is that liberation takes time, training and a whole lot of practice.

Another way of putting this is that the liberty God has in mind for us is holistic liberty: not only freedom from concrete, external injustice and oppression, but also freedom from false confidence, from grasping anxiety—and above all, from distrust in God.

Deuteronomy’s version of the story makes this explicit: by “letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna,” God humbled the people of Israel, forming and reforming them so they might personally, viscerally “understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deut. 8:3). Jesus cites this verse during his own 40-day recapitulation of Israel’s years in the desert, during his own personal, visceral, humbling preparation for his ministry (Matt. 4:4).

The key theme of the wilderness-wandering narratives, then, is spiritual formation. Immediately following the trial of hunger comes its companion: a trial of thirst. True to form (again, it’s a 40-year training program), the people complain bitterly, stomping their feet and bringing charges against Moses.

Moses immediately names the underlying issue—“Why do you test the LORD?”—which is to say, “Why do you ask, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” But the people will have none of it, pressing Moses with sarcasm: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

The question is at once adolescent and, given the circumstances, completely understandable—and that’s just it. The difficult work of spiritual maturation cannot be carried out through talk, study or even excellent preaching and worship alone, though each of these can and must play its part. Christian discipleship ultimately comes down to life experience and actual practice—that is, to various forms of hunger and thirst lived out as opportunities to trust God, follow God and call on God to provide the nourishment we need.

The notion that our own needs, difficulties and trials may be occasions for spiritual formation is a dangerous idea; it can be misused as an excuse to pursue or prolong suffering. Used wisely and well, however, the idea is indispensable for life in the wilderness, and it deserves to be featured in Christian preaching, teaching and conversation. In short, the good news of Exodus 17 is that despite appearances, water does flow in the desert—and by the grace and guidance of God, not only that sweet spring but also our thirst itself may help us grow into the people we are meant to be.

This is good news for every migrant, every man or woman who ventures across deserts in search of a better life. But it is also good news for everyone else, and perhaps especially for those of us who don’t typically think of ourselves as migrants.

In truth, that is exactly who we are: wilderness wanderers, children in formation, pilgrims on the way. More than anything, we need to sit down with one another, tell our stories, undrown ourselves—and learn the slow, difficult, daily work of living out our struggles as occasions for trust in the One who has led us this far and will lead us home.

# Reflections on the lectionary

Smooth, April 3  
John 9:1-41

**THREE CENTURIES AGO** in the village of Olney, England, a new parish priest came to town. The townsfolk flocked to hear him, fascinated with his vibrant, personal style of preaching and his checkered past as a slave trader.

In those days learned clergy frequently wrote original verses for congregational singing, and the priest at Olney wrote in a testimonial, plainspoken style, often referring obliquely to his own sordid story and remarkable conversion. Each week, he or an associate would present some new verses.

One of these compositions was titled "Faith's Review and Expectation." It was a plain and plaintive little poem, humble and heartfelt, and for its earliest audiences, it didn't stand out and was soon forgotten. But the song survived the priest, whose name was John Henry Newton. "Amazing Grace" crossed the Atlantic and became perhaps the most beloved hymn in the English-speaking world, not least among African-American communities.

For imagery and language, Newton drew on the parable of the prodigal son: "I once was lost, but now am found" (Luke 15:24) and on texts such as John 9, the story of Jesus' encounter with the man born blind: "Was blind, but now I see." John 9:1-41 is a story of a controversy, and it includes one of the most poignant verses in the whole gospel, a kind of window through which we can glimpse something of the pain and tension that troubled both John and his community.

The verse appears as a group of religious authorities are attempting to determine whether or not the alleged healing is bona fide; they call the man's parents as witnesses. The parents confirm the healing but plead ignorance about whether it had anything to do with Jesus.

"His parents said this," John explains, "because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." This whole question of "being put out of the synagogue" haunts the Gospel of John and is a primary theme of this passage. The investigation ends with the formerly blind man being driven out—and in this sense, literally speaking, he stands for the Johannine community as a whole. He sees, and yet is rejected by those who don't.

Of course, as today's church conflicts demonstrate, this kind of polemic should immediately inspire skepticism about who actually rejected whom; no doubt it was a messy affair, as all such partings are. The point is that if we listen between and

behind the lines of John's account, the echoes of emotional trauma—that is, of communal separation—are unmistakable. John is only too anxious to make his case, compile evidence and saddle "the Jews" with the blame.

It's worth noting, however, both in order to understand John more clearly and to avoid the crude anti-Judaism too often bred by Christian readings of texts like this one, that only a few pages earlier (last week's lection), Jesus declares that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Moreover, in John 9, the Jewish authorities are hardly of one mind: some find Jesus guilty of sin, but others believe in his works, asking, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"

The fact is, in this passage and elsewhere, John is deeply ambivalent, even conflicted, when it comes to the Jewish authorities, "the Jews" and Judaism. Since the sting and swagger of separation are so palpable in his prose, Christian readers should interpret and appropriate his language with the utmost care and discretion. There is a clear temptation here for Christians clannishly to identify themselves with those who "see" and the Pharisees—and the Jews generally—with those who are blind.

Which brings us to Jesus, the good rabbi who consistently

## Jesus enlightens the ignorant and confounds the arrogant.

corrects his disciples' overzealous foolishness. At the opening of this passage, Jesus dismisses all fascination with blame when it comes to the man's blindness in the first place. Don't interpret the world primarily in terms of sin and just deserts, he says, but rather in terms of occasions for divine glory.

At the passage's close, Jesus describes his mission: "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Jesus comes to enlighten the ignorant, but also to confound those who arrogantly claim to be in the know—and this applies no less to you and me than it does to his supposed opponents.

The lection's last line pulls the rug out from under any triumphal Christian interpretation of this story: Jesus warns, "But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." The church's fundamental role, then, is not to declare, "We see!" over against Jews or anyone else—for when we do, "our sin remains." Instead, our role is to sing and pray as humbly and doxologically as God's amazing grace allows, harmonizing with former slave traders and former slaves alike: "Was blind, but now I see!"

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*The author is Matthew Myer Boulton, who teaches at Harvard Divinity School.*

# Waiting to wed

by Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker

**SOME OUTSIDE OBSERVERS** look at the relationship scene among young adults and consider that it is entirely about short-term hookups and that the majority of emerging adults are avoiding lasting and meaningful intimate relationships in favor of random sex. While sexual norms have certainly changed, there's no evidence to suggest that emerging adults are uninterested in relationships that last, including marriage. In fact, they want to marry. Lots of studies show that nearly all young women and men say they would like to get married someday. We're not talking half or even 80 percent, but more like 93 to 96 percent. Most just don't want to marry now or anytime soon. They feel no rush.

The slow but steady increase in average age at first marriage—to its present-day 26 for women and 28 for men—suggests that the purpose of dating or romantic relationships is changing or has changed. Most sexual relationships among emerging adults neither begin with marital intentions nor end in marriage or even cohabitation. They just begin and end.

Reasons for their termination are numerous, of course, but one overlooked possibility is that many of them don't know how to get or stay married to the kind of person they'd like to find. For not a few, their parents provided them with a glimpse into married life, and what they saw at the dinner table—if they dined with their parents much at all—didn't look very inviting. They hold the institution of marriage in high regard, and they put considerable pressure—probably too much—on what their own eventual marriage ought to look like. And yet it seems that there is little effort from any institutional source aimed at helping emerging adults consider how their present social, romantic and sexual experiences shape or war against their vision of marriage—or even how marriage might fit in with their other life goals.

In fact, talk of career goals seems increasingly divorced from the relational context in which many emerging adults may eventually find themselves. They speak of the MDs, JDs and PhDs they intend to acquire with far more confidence than they speak of committed relationships or marriage. The former seem attainable, the latter unclear or unreliable. To complicate matters, many educated emerging adults are concerned about possible relational constraints on their career goals.

Since emerging adults esteem the idea of marriage and yet set it apart as inappropriate for their age, waiting until marriage for a fulfilling sex life is considered not just quaint and

outdated but quite possibly foolish. Sex outside relationships might still be disparaged by many, but not sex before marriage. And yet creating successful sexual relationships—ones that last a very long time or even into marriage—seems only a modest priority among many in this demographic group. Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist who focuses on emerg-

## Emerging adults think sex is for the young and single, marriage for the old.

ing adulthood, notes the absence of relationship permanence as a value in the minds of emerging adults:

Finding a love partner in your teens and continuing in a relationship with that person through your early twenties, culminating in marriage, is now viewed as unhealthy, a mistake, a path likely to lead to disaster. Those who do not experiment with different partners are warned that they will eventually wonder what they are missing, to the detriment of their marriage.

Arnett's right. The majority of young adults in America not only think they should explore different relationships, they believe it may be foolish and wrong not to.

Instead, they place value upon flexibility, autonomy, change and the potential for upgrading. Allison, an 18-year-old from Illinois, characterizes this value when she describes switching from an older, long-term boyfriend (and sexual partner) to a younger one: "I really liked having a steady boyfriend for a long time, but then it just got to the point where it was like, 'OK, I need something different.' It wasn't that I liked him any less or loved or cared about him any less, I just needed a

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Mark Regnerus teaches at the University of Texas at Austin. Jeremy Uecker is a postdoctoral fellow at the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. This article is adapted from their book *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying*, just published by Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press.

change." Many emerging adults—especially men—conduct their relationships with a nagging sense that there may still be someone better out there.

**D**espite the emphasis on flexibility and freedom, most emerging adults wish to fall in love, commit and marry someday. And some already have (more about them shortly). The vast majority of those who haven't married believe themselves to be too young to "settle down." They are definitely not in a hurry. In a recent nationwide survey of young men, 62 percent of unmarried 25- to 29-year-olds (and 51 percent of 30- to 34-year-olds) said they were "not interested in getting married any time soon."

While their reticence could be for good reasons, their widespread use of this phrase suggests a tacitly antagonistic perspective about marriage. "Settling down" is something people do when it's time to stop having fun and get serious—when it's time to get married and have children, two ideas that occur together in the emerging-adult mind. In the same national survey of men we just noted, 81 percent of unmarried men age 25 to 29 agreed that "at this stage in your life, you want to have fun and freedom." (Even 74 percent of single 30- to 34-year-olds agreed.) That figure would have been even higher had men in their early twenties been interviewed.

Trevor, a 19-year-old virgin from North Carolina, agrees wholeheartedly with this sentiment. He would like to marry someday. When asked if there were certain things that people should accomplish before they're ready to marry, he lists the standard economic criteria. But he also conveys a clear understanding that his best days would be behind him: "I'd say before you're married, make sure you have a place to live. Don't have a child before marriage. . . . Have a decent paying job because, I mean, it's only going to get worse."

A distinctive fissure exists in the minds of young Americans between the carefree single life and the married life of economic pressures and family responsibilities. The one is sexy, the other is sexless. In the minds of many, sex is for the young and single; while marriage is for the old. Marriage is quaint, adorable.

Thus a key developmental task for Juan, a 19-year-old from Southern California, is to have his fill of sex before being content with a fixed diet. His advice would be to "get a lot of stuff out of your system, like messing around with girls and stuff, or partying."

Likewise, Megan, 22, from Texas, doesn't conceive of parenthood as a sexual life stage, the irony of it aside. She captures what very many young men and women believe to be a liability of marriage: the end of good sex. The last omnibus sex study of Americans—issued in 1994—disputes Megan's conclusion, but the power of surveys and statistics is nothing compared to the strength of a compelling story in the minds of many people.

We asked Megan whether married life would be less sexual than her single life:

Probably. [Because?] Just, as you age, your sex drive goes down. [OK.] I mean not because you want to be less sexual, that could be the case, but I won't know till I'm older. [So some people say when you get married, you settle down, like



*it's literally a settling down. Do you look at marriage and married sex as being like, "That's off in the future; it might be a disappointment. Now I'm having a better time"?]* Yeah. [Do you?] Yes. [Why?] Why do I think it might be a disappointment? [Sure.] Um, just because of the horror stories of getting married. Nobody wants to have sex anymore. [Where do you hear these stories?] Movies, other people. . . . [Like what? Can you think of one?] Um, there's plenty. Like the movie that just came out—*License to Wed*—there's this one scene where the guy is sitting on top of a roof with his best friend talking about how his wife doesn't want to have sex anymore.

Although Megan enjoys sex for its own sake and predicts a declining sex life in her future marriage, it's not the presumed death of sex that frightens her about marriage: "It's living with a guy that freaks me out." Author Laura Sessions Stepp claims that today's young adults are so self-centered that they don't have time for "we," only for "me." They begrudge the energy that real relationships require. If that's true—and we suspect that's a journalistic overgeneralization—Megan should get together with Patrick. While so far he's slept with six women, Patrick informed us that he cannot imagine being married, and yet he too plans to do exactly that someday:

Well, I don't want to get married now. I guess, like, I do want to find a girl, but I just can't see myself being married. . . . [And you can't see yourself getting married or being married because?] I guess I just don't like the idea of being real tied down.

Patrick's current girlfriend is someone to hang out with, have sex with and generally enjoy the company of. Imagining more than that frightens him: "You sacrifice like so much stuff to be in a relationship that I guess I'm just not ready to make that huge sacrifice yet." Nor is 23-year-old Gabriela from Texas:

Once you get married, your responsibilities change. It's no longer, "Oh, I want to go to China next year. I have to save up money." No. Now you have to pay for the house—or you have a job and you can't just leave, because your husband can't get that day off. And things like that. It isn't just you, it becomes you and another person. [So what do you think of that?] I think that it's fine when I'm older. [Which will be when?] At least 30.

Devon, a 19-year-old from Washington, does most of his peers one better. Getting married—which he too eventually plans to do—is not just about “settling down” from the vibrant sex life of his late teen years. It signifies a death, albeit a scripted and necessary one. When asked what he wanted out of marriage, he said, “Just to have a good ending to my life, basically.” Chen, a 20-year-old from Illinois, agrees: “I don’t really plan on getting married for a while, or settling down for a while. I’d like to do all my living when I’m young. Like, save all the rest of life—falling in love and having a family—for later.”

Such perspectives fly in the face of much empirical evidence about the satisfactions of marriage. That is, marriage tends to be good for emotional as well as sexual intimacy. Married people have access to more regular, long-term sex than do serially monogamous single adults. But that doesn’t feel true to many emerging adults. Many perceive their par-

ents as having modest or poor sex lives, and movie sex largely features singles.

Not every emerging adult pictures marriage as a necessary but noble death, of course. Elizabeth from New York likewise sees her twenties as about having fun. But her thirties (and marriage) would not be simply about settling down; they would be the time “when your life is really gonna kick into gear.” We suspect that contemporary male and female perspectives on marriage, sexuality and fertility are indeed different, on average—that many men anticipate the institution as necessary and good for them, but with less enthusiasm for it than women express. For emerging-adult men, the single life is great and married life could be good. For women, the single life is good but married life is potentially better.

**I**ronically, after years of marriage, men tend to express slightly higher marital satisfaction than women. Moreover, marriage seems to be particularly important in civilizing men, turning their attention away from dangerous, anti-social or self-centered activities and toward the needs of a family. Married men drink less, fight less and are less likely to engage in criminal activity than their single peers. Married husbands and fathers are significantly more involved and affectionate with their wives and children than are men in cohabiting relationships (with or without children). The norms, status rewards and social support offered to men by marriage all combine to help them walk down the path of adult responsibility.

No wonder the idea of marriage can feel like a death to them. It is indeed the demise of unchecked self-centeredness and risk taking. Many men elect to delay it as long as seems feasible, marrying on average around age 28. That’s hardly an old age, of course, but remember that age 28 is their median (or statistical middle) age at first marriage—meaning that half of all men marry then or later. Their decision to delay makes sense from a sexual economics perspective: they can access sex relatively easily outside of marriage, they can obtain many of the perceived benefits of marriage by cohabiting rather than marrying, they encounter few social pressures from peers to marry, they don’t wish to marry someone who already has a child, and they want to experience the joys and freedoms of singleness as long as they can.

A good deal more is known about why people are not marrying in early adulthood than why some still do. And yet a minority marry young—and even more wish they were married—despite the fact that cohabitation and premarital sex are increasingly normative and socially acceptable. While the majority of emerging adults have no wish to be married at present, more than we expected actually harbor this desire. Just under 20 percent of unmarried young men and just under 30 percent of such women said they would like to be married now. Religious emerging adults are more apt to want to be married. And those emerging adults who are in a romantic or sexual relationship are nearly twice as likely to want to be married now than those who aren’t in a relationship. Cohabitors are more than four times as likely to want to be married as those who are single. In fact, just under half of cohabiting young

## No one can boast

On the tollway just south of Kenosha  
spring sets the boarded-up porn store ablaze,  
topaz dousing the peeling paint,  
the harp-notes of ice on the gutters.  
On the embankment home geese gather  
in the mud-slush. Tractors lift their beams  
to the rising temple of a new overpass.

I outlasted winter, four months rumpled  
under snow. On Christmas we woke  
to a broken furnace, the baby’s fingers  
carrot-stick cold. One night I skidded  
off the patio steps. Most mornings I stared  
out the window, wondering how far  
I’d driven my life in the ground,  
asking the darkness how much longer.

I kill the radio. Just the hum of the motor,  
the pitted road, my slow, steady breath  
like the syllables *Yah, weh*. I didn’t work  
at this joy. It just appeared in the splash  
and shine of I-94, as suddenly as these Frisbees  
and sand buckets in the roadside yards  
laid bare by the shrinking snow.

Tania Runyan

women and 40 percent of cohabiting young men said they'd like to be married right now.

Obviously, getting married introduces the risk of getting divorced. And that very specter remains a key mental barrier to relationship commitment among emerging adults. Six in ten unmarried men in their late twenties—who are already beginning to lag behind the median age at marriage—report that one of their biggest concerns about marriage is that it will end in divorce. Thus getting married young is increasingly frowned upon not just as unwise but as a moral mistake in

- The likelihood of a marriage (either a man's or a woman's) lasting ten years exceeds 60 percent beginning at age 21.
- Starting around age 23 (until at least 29), the likelihood of a woman's marriage lasting ten years improves by about 3 percent with each added year of waiting.
- However, no such linear "improvement" pattern appears among men.

The most significant leap in avoiding divorce occurs by simply waiting to marry until age 21. The difference in success between, say, marrying at 23 and marrying at 28 is just not as substantial as many emerging adults believe it to be. And among men, there are really no notable differences to speak of. While sociologist Tim Heaton finds that teenage marriage—and perhaps marriage among 20- and 21-year-olds—carries a higher risk of marital disruption, he too notes that "increasing the age at marriage from 22 to 30 would not have much effect on marital stability."

Still, to most of us, marital success is more than just managing to avoid a divorce. It's about having a good marriage. Sociologist Norval Glenn's study of marital success, in which "failure" is defined as either divorce or being in an unhappy marriage, reveals a curvilinear relationship between age at marriage and marital success. Women who marry before 20 or after 27 report lower marital success, while those marrying at ages 20–27 report higher levels of success. The pattern is a bit different for men. Men who marry before age 20 appear to have only a small chance at a successful marriage, while those who marry between ages 20 and 22 or after age 27 face less daunting but still acute challenges for a successful marriage. The best odds for men are in the middle, at ages 23–27. In a meta-analysis of five different surveys that explored marriage outcomes, researchers note that respondents who marry between ages 22 and 25 express greater marital satisfaction than do those who marry later.

In other words, the conventional wisdom about the obvious benefits to marital happiness of delayed marriage overreaches. Why it is that people who wait into their late twenties and thirties may experience less marital success rather than more is not entirely clear—and the finding itself is subject to debate. But it may be a byproduct of their greater rates of cohabitation. While relationship quality typically declines a bit over the course of marriage, the same process is believed to occur during cohabitation. If so, for many couples who marry at older ages, the "honeymoon" period of their relationship may have ended before they married, not after.

All these findings, however, are largely lost on emerging adults because of the compelling power of the popular notion in America that marriages carry a 50 percent risk of divorce. Consequently, marriage is considered off-limits to many emerging adults, especially those in the middle of college or building a career. Thus while research suggests that adults who are married and in monogamous relationships report more overall happiness and both more physical and more emotional satisfaction with sex, emerging adults don't believe it. Such claims just don't feel true. And why should they? When was the last time you watched a romantic film about a happily married 40-year-old couple?

## The conventional wisdom that favors delaying marriage is off the mark.

which the odds of failure are perceived as too high to justify the risk.

This conventional wisdom is at work in journalist Paula Kamen's interview with a 24-year-old woman who claims she knows her boyfriend far better than her parents knew each other when they married. But would she marry him? No: "Like, are you stupid? Have you read the statistics lately?"

Emerging adults claim to be very stats-savvy about marriage. They are convinced that half of all marriages end in divorce, suggesting that the odds of anyone staying married amounts to a random flip of a coin. In reality, of course, divorce is hardly a random event. Some couples are more likely to divorce than others: people who didn't finish high school, people with little wealth or income, those who aren't religious, African Americans, couples who had children before they married, those who live in the South, those who cohabited before marrying and those who live in neighborhoods that have elevated crime and poverty rates. Lots of emerging adults have a few of these risk factors for divorce, but most don't have numerous factors.

**A**nd yet the compelling idea in the minds of many is that any given marriage's chance of success—however defined—is only 50–50, and worse if you marry early. In fact, most Americans who cite the statistics argument against considering marriage in early adulthood tend to misunderstand exactly what "early marriage" is. Most sociological evaluations of early marriage note that the link between age-at-marriage and divorce is strongest among those who marry as teenagers (in other words, before age 20). Marriages that begin at age 20, 21 or 22 are not nearly so likely to end in divorce as most Americans presume. Data from the 2002 National Study of Family Growth suggest that the probability of a marriage lasting at least ten years—hardly a long-term success, but a good benchmark of endurance—hinges not only on age-at-marriage but also on gender.

- Men and women who marry at or before age 20 are by far the worst bets for long-term success.

# Sacramental sex

by Elizabeth Myer Boulton and Matthew Myer Boulton

**WE WERE CAUGHT off guard, and so we stalled for time. It was a cold New England morning. We'd already finished breakfast, brushed teeth, pulled on boots, coats, hats and gloves and loaded our two children into the car for the ride to school, preschool and then work.**

Mind you, we've done a decent job laying the groundwork. "The egg comes from the Mama," we'd say with good cheer over the dinner table or during a bath. "And the seed comes from the Dadda. And when the seed and the egg come together, they grow and grow in Mama's belly until one day a new baby is ready to come out."

We've kept it simple, of course, doing our best to stay open, calm and casual so that the broad topics of bodies and sexuality would not end up sounding taboo or embarrassing or wrong.

But on that fateful car ride, the questions wouldn't quit. "Mama, do your eggs look like those brown freckly ones in the fridge?" "Mama, where do you keep them?" "Dadda, where do you keep your seeds?" "How do they come out?"

As this impromptu catechism picked up speed, we traded glances, our smiles faintly beginning to resemble grimaces. And that's when our oldest delivered the doozy: "How do the egg and the seed come together?"

We stalled. We hemmed and hawed.

"When you become a grown-up," one of us eventually stammered, "you'll learn how to do that."

In the context of our conversation that morning, this was true, more or less—but in another sense, it wasn't. In fact, in the context of the wider, wintry world outside our car, the truth is that our kids will come to know "how to do that" long before they're grown-ups—which is to say, long before they're ready to do it.

Sometimes we wonder if, in its own way, something like this has been happening in many Christian churches when it comes to the topic of sex. As leaders, as institutions, as well-meaning disciples we do our best to lay down some decent groundwork, but when confronted with the more challenging questions about sexuality and Christian life we find ourselves unprepared—and so we freeze, and stammer, and stall.

When churches do talk about sex theologically, the spectrum of approaches to the subject can seem woefully narrow. On premarital sex, for example, some cast the discussion in terms of "purity," "chastity" and "saving oneself," while others frame the question primarily in terms of risk and street-

smarts—that is, as chiefly a matter of avoiding unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

Meanwhile, according to the Center for Disease Control's 2009 data, nearly half of all high school students (46 percent) reported already having had sexual intercourse, and one third of them reported having had it in the previous three months. Likewise, a recent study by the Guttmacher Institute found that no less than nine out of ten Americans report having had sex before marriage, with similar rates among those who abstained from sex until age 20 or older.

In other words, by all accounts the world is full of sex before or otherwise apart from marriage. What do North American churches have to say about it? Some call for purity in the face of potential pollution; others for prudence in the face of poten-

**Sex is meant to be part of our vision of God's love in everyday life.**

tial pregnancy or disease. But more often than not, we stammer and stall. We change the subject.

**F**or Christians, conversations about this topic (even and especially the ones in the car on the way to school) should take place, implicitly or explicitly, in light of Christian sacraments and sacramental life. Put another way, the whole topic of premarital sex cannot be conceived or evaluated properly apart from a broader discussion of the nature and purposes of marriage and the nature and purposes of sex. And these are, we insist, fundamentally sacramental subjects.

As Protestant ministers, we well understand why the 16th-century reformers simplified the prevailing sacramental system by reducing the number of sacraments from seven to two (baptism and communion). But if there was ever a "baby out with the bathwater" scenario in Christian theological history, this is it.

Too often, Protestants think of the church's sacraments as occasional, more or less meaningful episodes that take place in

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worship—and as little else. On the contrary, baptism and communion are meant to found and form the sensual, material basis of Christian lives, from our morning showers to our midnight snacks and everything in between.

Recall Martin Luther's famous line, for example: "Whenever you wash your face, remember your baptism." Or Calvin's claim that the Lord's table is meant among other things to remind us that all of our nourishment comes from God: our daily bread, yes, but also and especially our daily spiritual nourishment, for which Jesus himself is our "bread of life" (John 6:35). If it's difficult to imagine elements more mundane and everyday in human affairs than food and water—well, that's no accident. We are meant to live sacramental lives.

Though baptism and communion play special, paradigmatic roles in everyday lives, other important and equally sensual aspects of human existence—suffering, vocation, repentance, relationships—also have a sacramental character. They have the capacity to be, each in its own way, a visible, tangible sign of God's invisible grace.

Indeed, Protestants of all people should emphasize not only baptism and communion but also and decisively Jesus Christ as the one true sacrament, the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). Here the sons and daughters of the European reformations might take a page from the Eastern Orthodox playbook. Insofar as all things are in and through Christ, everything has the potential to play a sacramental role—provided we have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts thrown wide open to a God who dwells with and within us.

In short, even as we privilege baptism and communion as the church's primary sacraments, we do well to continue developing our sense and appreciation for sacramentality throughout creation. Once this larger context is in view, we may fruitfully turn to consider the topic of sex and, in particular, sex outside of marriage.

**I**n light of the sacraments, a much more compelling and rigorous approach to human sexuality becomes possible: a rich, candid, ongoing ecclesial conversation about sex as both an earthly pleasure and a heavenly treasure, a feast and a gift, a delight and an honor and therefore a breathtaking responsibility. Above all, reframing sexuality as a sacramental gift holds the promise of teaching young and old alike that, at its best and by the grace of God, sexual intimacy can be a vivid taste of the loving relationship that God desires to have with us.

Of course, this idea is by no means new. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" the poet sings, "For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us make haste" (Song of Songs 1:1-3).

For centuries, the most prestigious text in the highest echelons of Christian spiritual formation was arguably the Song of Songs, a passionate poem of two lovers longing for each other. Utterly enthralled, each searches for language to describe and adore and adorn the beloved. Animals, plants,



perfumes, spices—a dazzling range of creatures and senses are enlisted by both partners, all for the sake of singing of their love.

In reading Christian commentaries on the Song down through the ages, it can sometimes seem as though the church's smile begins to resemble a grimace. "Don't read too literally," some commentators seem to say. "This song isn't actually about sex or carnal appetite. That bag of myrrh lying between the woman's breasts—it isn't what it appears to be. In fact, the Song is an allegory, a figurative portrait of the love between God and God's people, between Christ and his bride, the church."

But even the most consistently allegorical readers of the Song are doing something quite interesting: they are reading ancient erotic lyrics as an indispensable window into the deepest nature of reality, the innermost chamber, the truth about how things really are—and are meant to be—between God and humanity. Today's readers, then, do well to avoid falling into the "either figural or literal" trap, instead affirming both the Song's erotic, warm-blooded, fleshy celebration of sexual love and the ways in which these very things open up into an allegorical picture of a divine-human embrace.

In other words, the Song is a prime example of resources in Christian traditions for thinking about sex as sacramental—that is, as providing an experiential glimpse, taste and sense of God's love for us and our most fitting love for God. These forms of divine and human love are not disembodied, abstract or merely solemn, the Song seems to say. On the contrary, they are consummately embodied, particular, passionate and playful forms of love, full of hyperbole and longing and surprise, and therefore best evoked with the rhetoric of eros. At the same time, human eros itself is best described, finally and most fittingly, as a part of life that points toward God and in which God is present.

Our yearnings for each other, for physical and emotional intimacy, for the exhilaration of communion, for the tenderness of touch—all of these are real and valuable in their own right, as real and as valuable and as blessed as water and bread. At

the same time, these are also yearnings for God and may be experienced as tangible tastes of God's yearning for us. In this sense, at its best, sex is sacramental.

And yet, God knows, sex is not always "at its best." In the Song's fifth chapter, the woman awakes in the middle of night and discovers that her beloved is gone. She searches anxiously for him, running out into the streets of the city, only to suffer unspeakable abuse from the city's guards. Despite the rhapsodic evocations of flowers, perfumes and beautiful gazelles, this is no Eden, but rather a broken, fallen world riddled with vulnerability and pain.

In the modern world no less than the ancient one, human bodies, human egos and human histories are fragile things, wonderfully and fearfully made. If sex is sacramental, it can actually be so only in the context of genuine love and care, tenderness and fidelity—precisely because God is loving, tender, faithful and true. We count ourselves among the many Christians who want to counter Christianity's widespread reputation for being negative about sex. But a positive approach to sex cannot ignore the ways in which sex can demean and destroy: from incest to date rape, pornography to pedophilia.

At its best, then, and only at its best, sex is a taste of heaven on earth. And heaven is not to be trifled with. It needs to be treasured, shielded, nurtured and given room to thrive and grow. For these reasons, it needs "strings attached": strings that protect, limit and properly empower.

Like the couple in the Song of Songs, we do not reside in the Garden of Delight. Ask any pastor and she will tell you story after story of the pain and shame her people carry because of sexual abuse or demoralization. In order to flourish, sex needs a sanctuary. It needs a refuge, an ark against the storm, precisely so our wounds might better heal. It needs a fence around the playing field, we might say, precisely so delight might rule the day.

Marriage and life partnerships ideally aim to provide just this kind of sanctuary. It is no accident that Christian traditions are so full of covenantal language: God is a God of covenant, a God of committed relationships, a God of sacred and holy union.

Over and over in scripture, God's relationship with humanity is compared to a marriage, not because there aren't other metaphors available but rather because our covenants, our committed relationships, our unions, our marriages, our intimacy and our sex may illumine the character of divine love and what it means to be a human being.

**W**hich brings us to the question of premarital sex. What is sex for? On one level, it's for bearing fruit and creating more life and liveliness in an often barren, death-dealing world. And on another level, it's for strengthening the love and communion between two faithful, caring partners.

But if sex is also fundamentally sacramental—that is, if its most basic purpose is to provide those two partners with a sensual, visceral opportunity to glimpse, taste and touch God's love and delight in them—then it must be truthful, tender, devoted, delightful sex. It may or may not include myrrh or cinnamon or the grace of gazelles—if it does, so much the better. For in such visible, tangible, earthly things, the love of God may be seen and felt anew.

To seek out someone with whom to share this kind of relationship, then, means seeking out a partner in a daring, delicate adventure of a lifetime. And once this goal is in view, it becomes quite clear, we argue, that fidelity and commitment are not optional features of a healthy sexual life; they are indispensable conditions of it. Why? Because sex is sacramental, and sacramental things require a sanctuary.

Think of it this way: marriages and other life partnerships are meant to be like so many nests in the windswept tree of human civilization. They are safe havens, homes, places of shelter and refuge in which precious, vulnerable eggs are protected. Sometimes such nests include children and sometimes not, but they always include dreams, and promises, and two fragile, yearning, healing hearts.

Or, to shift the metaphor, these partnerships are meant to be like flowerbeds

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where seeds wait deep in the cold, dark earth, growing little by little until that day they break through and bloom, filling the whole world with color and fragrance. Each flowerbed needs a gardener—a couple of gardeners, to be exact—and likewise, each nest needs two helpers, two partners to build it and then to look after it, continually making the small and important repairs.

For sooner or later, God knows, the winds will blow and the predators will come around. Even when the coast is clear, the nest is nonetheless necessary, since those are the days that

## Our covenants may illumine the character of divine love.

divine love may most vividly come shining through.

"How do the egg and the seed come together?" The next time our children ask this question, we'll be ready—but not only to give them a standard age-appropriate anatomical answer. For our part, at least, we can envision something far better.

What if everything we teach our kids about sex were grounded, sometimes explicitly but always implicitly, in a larger vision of how God's love is glimpsed, tasted and touched in everyday, sensual, material life, even and especially in the best of human sexuality? What if we described sex not only as "a special way grown-ups express their love for each other" but also and primarily as "a special way grown-ups experience God's love for us"?

And better yet, what if there was a church community in which our kids could grow up hearing a hundred and one variations on this theme? What if they heard the idea articulated (and here's the crucial point) by adults other than their parents: educators, youth group leaders, pastors, elders and deacons? Indeed, what if churches became widely known as places where this kind of sacramental vision, this kind of ongoing conversation, is alive and well?

That would be the proper crucible, we contend, for communal and personal discernment about whether or not premarital sex is ever appropriate, and if it is, precisely when it is.

For those who insist that sex always belongs within the sanctuaries of marriage or life partnership, the centerpiece of the case should be neither "purity" nor "prudence" but rather the love of God sacramentally available in and through the best of human intimacy. From this point of view, sex belongs within lifelong, faithful partnerships not for abstract moral reasons,

but precisely because in and through sexuality we are meant to taste God's lifelong, faithful love for us.

For those who insist that under certain conditions sex may properly take place outside of marriage or life partnership, the sacramental dimensions of sexual life may help clarify those conditions. From this point of view, because God is faithful and sex is sacramental, human sexuality should take place within relational sanctuaries of fidelity and commitment. Because God is love, because God delights in us, because God knows us and calls us by name, human sexuality should always and only be loving, playful and kind—never casual, anonymous or cavalier.

Indeed, in the end, understanding sexuality sacramentally may help ground desperately needed discussions of sexuality *within* marriages and life partnerships. That is, the beneficiaries of this approach may be not only teens and singles but partnered people too, and perhaps them most of all. As so often happens in Christian life, what starts out as "good for the children" ends up being good for the whole human family.

Sex isn't for everyone, and neither is marriage. But for those called to these two great mysteries, a lifelong, life-giving challenge may be to live into them not simply as divine gifts but as *sacramental* divine gifts meant to incarnate God's redeeming love. This approach won't answer all of our questions, but it may well help us cast our conversations in the right terms: water and bread, cinnamon and myrrh, joy and discipline, for God's sake and for ours.

*We celebrate our colleague Research Professor C. Ellis Nelson on the occasion of his 95th birthday, with gratitude to God for his many years of service to the church as Christian educator, seminary president, author, wise counselor, and generous friend.*



### Happy Birthday, Ellis!



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# How my mind has changed

# Prayer as crucible

by Sarah Coakley

**THERE IS A SENSE** in which my mind has changed only once in the course of my career as a theologian, but once instigated, this change was so dramatic and transformative as to sweep everything else uncomfortably in its wake. Like a subterranean explosion, the intellectual fallout was initially difficult to trace to its source. But as I now see it, any subsequent theological changes must be seen as the direct or indirect result of this first one—and there is no end to the changes in sight.

This is not the story of a classic conversion experience, let alone of a pietistic revulsion against the intellect. On the contrary, it is an account of how prayer—especially the simple prayer of relative silence or stillness—has the power to change one's perception of the theological task. What started as an adventure in personal prayer—which drew me in much faster and more disconcertingly than I was ready for—has ended in a program for systematic theology (and its handmaid, philosophy of religion) which is as much implicated in the corporate and the social as it is in the personal. For that is where prayer inexorably leads us.

The familiar feminist slogan has a real point here: “The personal is the political.” That is why what follows is by no means a narrative of individual religious experience in the modern sense analyzed most memorably by William James. Rather, it is an account of how a practice that might, at best, count as a failed Jamesian religious experience could nonetheless make a different sort of theologian out of me, one committed to what I now call theology *in via* (a theology “on the road”). And if one’s theology is *in via*, then there is no horizon that does not potentially involve ever further personal change.

It has only been in the past decade that I have been fully able to see what all this might mean theologically. It is not a coincidence, I am sure, that it is also within those last ten years that I have been formed as a priest (with all the extraordinary humiliations, joys and transformations that this necessarily involves), have fallen afoul of the secularized academic institution (Harvard Divinity School) I was trying to serve, and have

struggled with a set of increasingly destructive disjunctions—both intellectual and ecclesiastical—that afflict many of us in the field of academic theology today, especially in North America. My perspective is a transatlantic one, however, for I now teach in England, and my priesthood is exercised in the university and at an English cathedral—not that many of the difficulties go away, of course.

This may so far sound like a merely personal narrative. In fact, I now realize in retrospect that the political, social and intellectual backdrop of the time was crucial for how I responded to the initial crisis of prayer, as I shall try to indicate.

But I must first attempt to speak honestly of that original subterranean explosion of prayer.

*It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a CENTURY series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined.*

*This article is the twelfth in the series.*

Paul seemed to admit that prayer was pretty much humanly impossible (Rom. 8:26)—and that was only the first of the puzzles.

I was drawn in my childhood and adolescence to several people who had the evident aura of holiness and for whom prayer was a central focus. To find out later that their lives were, in other respects, difficult, fractured and even morally blinkered was a paradox with which I continue to struggle. But holiness is not the same thing as psychoanalytic wholeness; and if it was prayer that made them what they were, then I wanted it too. Or rather, what I wanted was God.

After many attempts at daily intercession and scriptural meditation which seemed unsatisfying (although I am sure they were exactly what was needed at the time), it was in my mid-twenties that I finally found my way into a simpler form of prayer via an experiment with Transcendental Meditation. I

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took this up on the excuse of needing an antidote to stress in my first academic job. The impact was electrifying.

I hadn't been going longer than about two months with this simple discipline of 20 minutes of silence in the morning and early evening when what I can only call a seismic shift of seemingly unspeakable proportions began to afflict me. Whatever was going on here was not only "transcendental" but severely *real*. Clearly I was going to have to make some metaphysical choices, and fast. Either I could buy (literally) the next set of courses with the TM folk and be introduced to some important framework ideas from Vedanta, or I could seek to bring whatever was happening to me into some sort of alliance with my Christian faith. I chose the latter option.

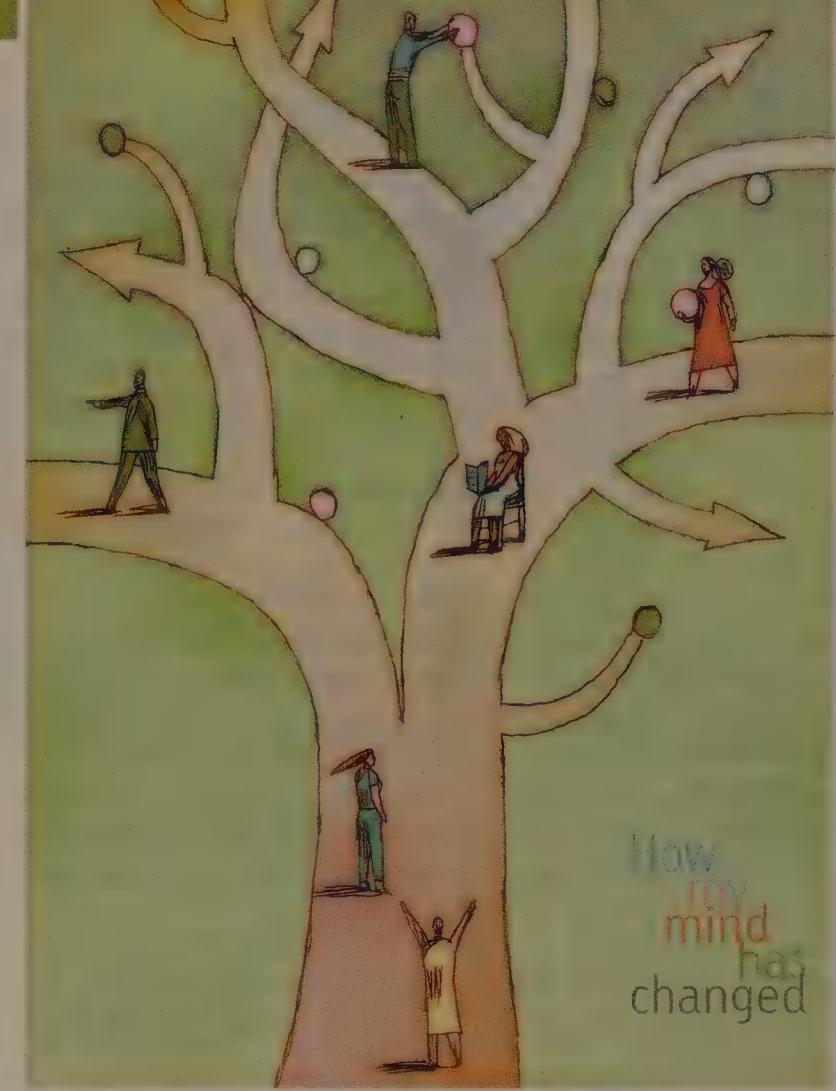
Had movements such as "centering prayer" been operative at that time, my path would have been a great deal easier and I would have known that what was happening to me was nothing special at all but part and parcel of any sustained commitment to silence. As it was, I was blundering along in the dark, and even my first attempt at seeking proper spiritual direction (which I certainly needed) ended in a painful and crushing rebuff.

Yet it was strangely impossible to step off the spiritual roller coaster which was now in full swing. I recall finding a letter of

## Learning to pray is disturbing for anyone trained to "master" material.

Basil the Great in which he describes the adventure of prayer as like getting into a boat with the decks constantly shifting under one; this was some comfort, as was the discovery of Bernard of Clairvaux's many meditations on the "fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom," fear marking the necessary cracking open of the heart before God if prayer is to develop and deepen. Since the ground was (literally and fearfully) heaving for me too, I had urgent recourse to whatever patristic, medieval and early modern treatises on prayer I could lay hands on. Little was I to know at the time that this was to lead me to a complete rethinking of doctrinal development in the early church and beyond.

For as I rapidly discovered, when one came at that history without the forced modern distinction between "spiritual" and "dogmatic" texts, a whole new world lay before one: spiritual growth and doctrinal truth hung newly together. The history of doctrine became likewise the entangled history of spiritual and political struggle—including intense struggles over questions of gender and authority. But this did not reduce doctrinal questions to (secularized) issues of sex and power, as was becoming a fashionable mode of analysis in the wake of Michel Foucault. On the contrary, the commitment to prayer strung one on the rack of the painful internalization of divine truth. For me, this change of approach heralded no nostalgic or romantic return to a premodern era, as was—at the other end of the spectrum from the Foucauldians—also becoming popular in various forms of neo-conservatism. Here the slogan was: "Down with



TODD DAVIDSON

the Enlightenment and back to the Fathers and medievals!" No, for me it was a retrieval of a classic tradition sweated painfully out of the exigencies of prayer encountered primarily as darkness and disturbance.

But I must not leave the impression that this adventure in prayer was all anxiety-making, although its initial impact on my sense of self as a young theologian was certainly that. Underneath was an extraordinary sense of spiritual and epistemic expansion—of being taken by the hand into a new world of glorious technicolor, in which all one's desires were newly magnetized toward God, all beauty sharpened and intensified. Yet simultaneously all poverty, deprivation and injustice were equally and painfully impressed with new force on my consciousness.

It was as if the darkness of fear, which had been newly hypostatized as "race" at the Enlightenment (perhaps because the awesome "God" in Godself was now off limits, epistemologically, according to Kant), had been firmly placed out of sight in my privileged academic education and was now hitting me from out of the depths with all the force of that which the White Man cannot bear to see. This connection between Enlightenment epistemological issues and the modern question of race really became clear to me only when I was doing prison chaplaincy work in a jail in Boston during my priestly formation. (See my article "Jail break: Meditation as subversive activity," *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, June 29, 2004.)

I was myself now on the margins, seeing things all askew. I was forced to reconsider the very nature of the human intellect, its goals and its tasks, its relations to affect and especially to what the Christian tradition has called spiritual sensation.

Lest this seem like a claim to some special supernatural encounter, I hasten to add that the daily practice of silence itself was usually more like the tedious quotidian discipline of brushing one's teeth than anything else. It was the effects outside prayer—including, of course, the effects on other normal Christian or academic duties (hearing the Word, participating in the sacraments, attending to students in difficulties, writing lectures and so on)—that were initially hard to quantify and yet palpably transforming of all my previous theological assumptions.

I had been trained at Cambridge in an era of benign but somewhat vapid biblical liberalism, which irritated me not because it was liberal (that was more the complaint of my fellow student Rowan Williams, I think) but because for the most part it failed to probe the philosophical assumptions it was making about the relation between scriptural texts, historical verifiability and theological truth. Propelled by these historiographical concerns, I followed up my initial degree, after a brief spell at Harvard, with a dissertation focused on Ernst Troeltsch's Christology. ("You could write *that* on a postage stamp," remarked Stephen Sykes, my Cambridge teacher in systematics; I set out with the arrogance of youth to prove him wrong.) I was driven by a desire to pinpoint the precise philosophical conditions under which incarnational claims for Christ would seem probative; my mind-set—more unconscious

than conscious, I suspect—was that of classic British foundationalism (the philosophical doctrine that says all legitimate claims to truth must be "founded" in certain basic, unassailable truths which all thinking subjects have in common—e.g., those which are known directly by the senses or are self-evident or logically irrefutable). I must have imbibed Locke with my mother's milk, for at Cambridge I mainly read Hume and Kant (under the eccentric tutelage of Donald MacKinnon), followed by my beloved Troeltsch, whom I sought to reinstate after Barth's savage critique.

**R**ound about the time I was finishing the doctoral thesis, however, the bottom fell out of those fundamental philosophical assumptions which I had simply taken for granted. What I had thought were just some nasty bumps in the area of my spiritual life was impinging with force on my entire philosophical agenda.

It took me many years to bring these changes in my theological picture to full fruition and to have the courage to express them explicitly and boldly. But in recent years I can say that this has at last happened, urged on by the necessary integration of pastoral and theological tasks occasioned by my ordination process.

Three particular shifts can perhaps form my focus in this article. Of course, they did not occur without impact from the

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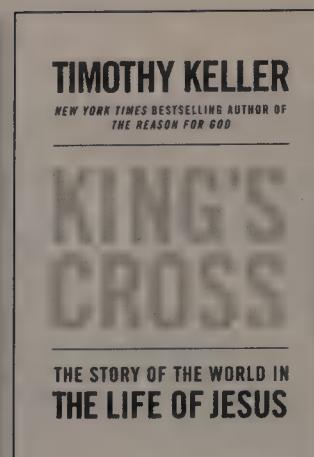
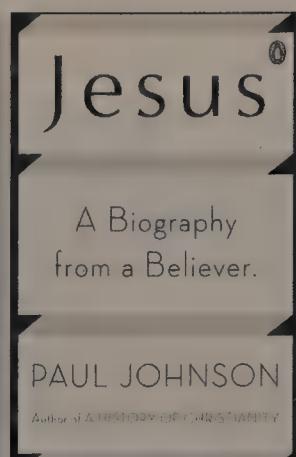
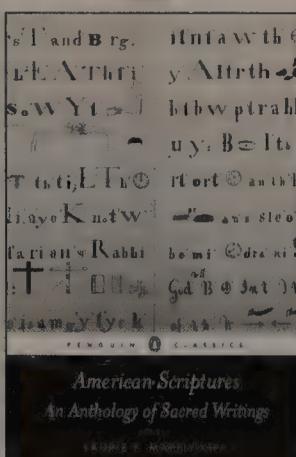
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surrounding intellectual and political circumstances of North America in the same decade, as I shall try to clarify. One might say that they arose in a sort of tense contrapuntal relation to the new theological disjunctions of the time, both liberal and conservative. But they seemingly fitted neither of these parties with any ease.

*Control and loss of control: "powers and submissions."* At the heart of the prayer of silence is a simple surrendering of

control to God. Instead of a busy setting of one's own agendas, prayer becomes pared down to wanting God alone—"with the sharp darts of longing love," as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* memorably puts it. This is not to say that petition or intercession are abandoned—far from it. But they are now set in the context of an underlying submission to the divine: as Paul has it, this ceding of place is to the Spirit, who prays in us and for us (and others), with sighs too deep for words.

The discipline of learning this particular submission to the unique source of one's being is initially disturbing and even weird, especially for anyone who has been trained to "master" material and to put her chosen mark on it. "The intellect faces a blank and the will follows it," as Dom John Chapman aptly described this curious way of "wasting time" before God. But then should one not expect an intentional noetic interaction with God to be unlike any other interaction? Should one be surprised if the effect is dizzying? It took me a long while to come to terms with this fundamental problem and its implications.

Not only was this shift into practiced loss of control intrinsically anxiety-making, it also brought with it for me a taxing feminist paradox. Was not lack of control, lack of autonomy, precisely the problem that women were countering with feminism? Was not vulnerability an ill to be avoided rather than a precious state to be inculcated? Was not this, in other words, a dangerous invitation to sexist discrimination, even abuse? (I recall Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, at the time of my appointment to Harvard in 1991, insisting that I stop talking and writing about vulnerability.)

It took me a while to work out that a seriously false dichotomy was at work here, and that submission to God and silence before God—being unlike any other submission or any other silence—was that which empowered one to speak against injustice and abuse and was the ground of true freedom (in God) rather than its suppression. (Of course, this set me against much American liberal feminism and womanism of the time, to my distress.)

It also took patience to grasp—through the deeper engagement with scripture and tradition that this practice was also drawing me into—that my whole concept of the bounds of selfhood was undergoing change. The meaning of

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the “body of Christ” in Paul sprang alive for the first time, and with that a mysterious sense of our deep mutual implication in each other’s lives as members of that body. And if this was what Christ meant for the here and now, then surely it must signal that my previous assumptions about a past, extrinsic “life of Jesus” as the only basis for Christology was wildly awry and fatally restricted (sorry, Troeltsch). The resurrection had reappeared—reentering triumphantly by stealth through the back door of my consciousness. Moreover, what had started as a frighteningly lonely journey of prayer now seemed to be the least lonely activity that one could possibly engage in—not only buzzing with communication, but positively crowded with angels and saints, the living and the dead.

*Sex, bodiliness and the mystery of desire.* This brings me to my second point of dramatic change. No less disturbing than the loss of noetic control in prayer and all that followed from that was the arousal, intensification and reordering of desire that this praying engendered. Anyone who has spent more than a short time on her or his knees in silence will know of the almost farcical raid that the unconscious makes on us in the sexual arena in such prayer, as if this is a sort of joke that God has up God’s sleeve to ensure that “ourselves, our souls and bodies” are what we present to God and not some pious disembodied version of such. Our capacity as Christians to try to keep sex and God in different boxes is seemingly limitless, but the integrative force of silent prayer simply will not allow this, or not for very long.

Huge difficulties need to be confronted here, and I do not think they can be faced quickly or without real pain and danger. Moreover, trying to make sense of all this in the face of currently fashionable postmodern gender theory has created some real points of contact in my recent theology, but also revealed deep differences in fundamental approach.

What is at stake from my perspective is not so much the overturning of societal gender stereotypes à la philosopher Judith Butler (though the courage engendered by prayer tends to lead there quite naturally) but rather the urgent question of how all our desires—not just for sex, but for money, power, fame and immortality—may be thrown by prayer into the purifying crucible of divine

desire. There is our own primary desire for God, of course, which we strive in prayer to put first; but underlying that is God’s unique and unchangeable desire for us, without which all our own striving is fruitless. As John of the Cross acknowledges so wonderfully in “The Living Flame,” at the end of his own long journey of desire: once all our desires are sorted and

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purged (not, note, repressed or obliterated) we enter a realm of infinite delight-in-God.

In other words, what prayer teaches, but only painfully and over time, is the ascetical task of acknowledging—and then adjudicating between—competing desires jostling within us, both good and ill. The acid test is the conformity to divine will (a matter on which we are often not best able to judge for ourselves—confession, direction and the help of our friends-in-Christ is crucial). But torn as we are now between the false modern alternatives of liberal libertinism and conservative repression, this precious third, ascetical alternative is seemingly a lost art in the affluent world of the West. The trouble is, it cannot in any case be our art to own and control: there is no escaping the hard graft of painful self-knowledge, patience—and prayer. God does the work in us if we allow it.

**W**hen future historians look back at this extraordinary period of ecclesiastical schisms over sex and gender, it will perhaps be possible to see this set of ructions not as the last prurient gasp of reactionary forces but as a more general crisis of what may be called the economy of desire. An erotic maturity is palpably lacking in our supposedly civilized world, and it cannot be commodified or hastened. It is an ascetic task for each one of us. While liberals say that we should stop worrying about sexual continence and start feeding the poor or saving the planet, conservatives rejoin that the whole planet is cosmically disordered in the first place if sexual desire is out of place. What if, again, both these alternatives are false ones, and sexual desire has to be dealt with alongside all these other desires, so that their “orientation” is finally ordered to God? On such a view, the wholly modern (intrinsically secular?) categorization of hetero-, homo- and bisexuality might fall into the background as distractions from this more urgent task. Any quest for integrity, truth and honesty will be suppressed here at self-defeating cost.

*Rationality and its expansion: variations on post-foundationalism.* The third area in which my mind has been changed is importantly related to the first two, but takes me into the realm of philosophy of religion, in which field my current post at Cambridge is focused. In a period when there has been a remarkable set of attacks on classical foundationalism by both philosophers and theologians, I have again felt myself to be plowing a subtly different course as a result of the prayer perspective I have tried to outline above. For the danger of the various theological critiques of such foundationalism (whether Thomist, Calvinist, Wittgensteinian or Barthian in inspiration) is that they can jump on a cur-

rent secular philosophical bandwagon—the fashionable raging against the Enlightenment—without supplying any very effective account of how theology can continue to engage philosophically with secular thought and still truly challenge it. Rhetorical fiat alone will not do the trick. For theologies in this environment all too easily become a series of loudly announced but basically

## An erotic maturity is lacking in our supposedly civilized world.

unargued sectarian assertions. This is the “anarchy of values” of which Wilhelm Dilthey so presciently spoke and with which philosophers such as John McIntyre and Charles Taylor (and, in his different way, Alvin Plantinga) have struggled afresh of late with great sophistication.

My own response to this philosophical and theological crisis is one that seeks to analyze the dark testing of contemplation as precisely an epistemological challenge. In other words, I continue to reject another false modern disjunction—that between spirituality and philosophy. It is not that contemplation affords just another sectarian theological perspective, which one can take or leave as one wills. Rather, its painful and

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often dark expansion of consciousness, its integration of thought and affect and its ethical sensitizing to what is otherwise neglected (including, of course, the poor “who are always with us”) all demand that one give an account of how philosophy, and science and politics too, cannot ultimately afford to ignore the apprehensions that contemplation invites.

Clearly this is a hugely ambitious philosophical program, and one that I am only now beginning to work out. The move from old-style rational proofs for God’s existence to dark, contemplative testing is emphatically not just a matter of adding prayer

experience and stirring. There is an expansion of reason’s remit here, a reconsideration of the place of affect, of epistemic training and of responsive integration (with interesting points of contact with the best recent turns in feminist epistemology), and an acknowledgment of the powerful ways in which what we prefer not to see dangerously affects what we *can* see. This has implications well beyond the theological camp: science itself is not immune. You could call this project a form of nonfoundationalism, but not quite of the usual sort. This is where my thought is heading in the coming years—if life and energy endure.

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## FAITH AND WORSHIP IN THE FACE OF HUMAN MORTALITY



I have attempted to explain how a practice which I first took up as a young theologian in my early twenties has disconcertingly changed my mind about almost everything—God, theology, philosophy, politics, race and feminism—and in ways I could scarcely even have imagined at the outset of the adventure. But particularly in the past decade, and against the backdrop of increasingly sharp tensions between postliberal, neoconservative and late-liberal schools of theology, I have come to see what it all might mean for me as a theologian and a priest. As the ecclesiastical world fractures over sex, and the academic world drives an increasingly false wedge between “the study of religion” and “Christian theology,” I find myself deeply uneasy with these particular battles and their presumptions. Yet, as I have been writing this essay (a task not itself without its own pain and difficulty), I have become freshly aware how obvious it was that I could be nothing but an irritant to the new regime of mandatory secularism (in the name of the “academic study of religion”) that came in at Harvard under President Larry Summers and has continued on today. The students themselves were perplexed by these disjunctions, of course; many of them had come to Harvard, after all, precisely to train as scholar-ministers and to integrate a calling to the church with the highest endeavors in theological learning.

In the coming decade we may perhaps hope to see some resolution of these current theological impasses. I am full of such hope. In the meantime I can only rejoice that Cambridge has welcomed me home and provided the ideal environment for me to continue having my mind changed. I have to say that I do not find the ground any firmer than it ever was in this strange, enticing journey into God.

## A delayed meeting

I WAS PARKING my car along the curb when I saw him again. Over the years I'd often seen him, always walking an old black Labrador retriever along the sidewalks of the elegant neighborhood where our church is located. Like the dog, the man had scruffy white whiskers. I wasn't sure who was slowing down for whom, but clearly both were getting on in years. He was using a cane, which was either new or something I hadn't noticed before.

It was a typical gloomy January afternoon in Pittsburgh. Old snow was gray on the ground.

There used to be a bent-over woman with a scarf around her hair, shuffling alongside the man and dog on these walks past our church. But I hadn't seen her for a long time and sometimes wondered about that.

These days I wonder why I wondered about these church neighbors whose names I didn't know. Maybe it was because I live a long way from my mother and would like to think that someone would notice if she suddenly stopped walking around the block. Maybe the man reminded me of my deceased father. Or maybe I'm just a sucker for an old dog with whiskers. What I do know is that sometimes you get stuck with a person you don't know, and you can spend a lot of time pondering his or her story.

The dog stopped and looked longingly at a squirrel that raced by. The old man chuckled and said something I couldn't hear. Then they resumed their ambling walk.

By the time I got out of the car and hurried to the entrance of the church, I was directly in their path. I had just finished teaching a class at the seminary and was running late for a staff meeting, so I hustled past the old man with a quick "Hi, how ya doing?" He stood there looking at me with yellowed eyes and said nothing.

Now I had a choice. I could rush into the important meeting or I could be a real pastor who stops, turns around, introduces himself and asks this man about his missing wife. I chose to keep moving.

I slid into the meeting, apologized for being late and tried to settle into the agenda. I'm sure my colleagues were presenting profound insights, but all I heard was, "Do you really want to know how I'm doing?"

I felt horrible. Here we were talking about ministry, and I had just refused an opportunity to minister when it was handed to me on a tarnished platter. I wondered if the old man was now in his kitchen, talking to the dog. Was he making a bowl of soup to take to his wife?

Weeks later, as I was leaving an evening board meeting at

church, I saw the old man 20 yards away, slowly making his way down the dark sidewalk with his dog beside him.

I unloaded a rehearsed apology for running past him that afternoon weeks before. But he interrupted me with a waving hand and said, "I know how busy you folks are 'cause I see all the cars around this church all the time." I couldn't accept the grace and apologized two or three more times. While I was at it, I told him that I was sorry I didn't know his name, and that led me into an apology for being a bad neighbor. "Oh, and I'm sorry that I haven't introduced myself." He started to smile, placed both hands on the cane now in front of him and asked, "Who's the priest here? You or me?"

I gently asked about the woman who used to walk with him. He smiled and glanced up at the barren tree limbs in the night sky. "That was my wife. She died a while back. Now it's just ol'

### I had a choice: I could rush to my meeting or I could stop to talk.

Sancho and me. But we're getting along pretty well." He jiggled the leash and added, "Aren't we, boy?"

We talked a bit, like neighbors—about the snow, potholes, the price of a nearby home that recently sold. Along the way it occurred to me that I've given lots of sermons focused on the church's mission to those in need. "Love your neighbor," I've echoed from the pulpit. The Bible's exhortation to care for the neighbor isn't necessarily a metaphor. We really do have a responsibility to the people who live near our church. But what exactly is that responsibility?

During a pause in our conversation, the old man looked into me with those yellow eyes and seemed to sense my quandary. "I've never been a churchgoing kind of guy," he said. "It seems hypocritical to start now that I'm so close to being dead myself." He chuckled again, as he had that afternoon when old Sancho looked longingly at a squirrel. "Still, it's a comfort knowing that I live near people who believe in stuff like heaven. I lean a lot these days . . . if you know what I mean."

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*M. Craig Barnes teaches at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and is the author of *The Pastor as Minor Poet* (Eerdman's).*

## Waiting for Selinsky

by Amy Frykholm

In the opening sequence of Olga Grushin's novel *The Line*, a respectable middle-school literature teacher approaches an old man in front of a kiosk with an innocent question: "What are they selling?" The old man's answer is haunting: "What would you like?"

"I'm sorry?"

"They are selling . . . whatever you would most like to have. What would you like?"

Anna, one of the story's three central characters, does not know the answer, and she has no intention of revealing her confusion to a stranger. But the book draws the reader into that question. What do you most want? Is it an object?

A state of being? A form of consciousness? What would you be willing to sacrifice to get it? *The Line* is a powerful, even profound meditation on the nature of desire and its cousins—greed, longing and hope.

The premise of the novel is drawn from a historical event. In 1962, the composer Igor Stravinsky returned to the Soviet Union from exile to give one concert. The line for tickets to this concert began forming a year in advance.

Intriguing as that historical event is, Grushin is not interested in re-creating it. Instead, she uses the historical instance to create something closer to an allegory or an elaborate fable.

*The Line* is the story of one family that waits in line for a year to attend the concert of the fictitious famous composer Igor Selinsky. Both time and space are compressed—the events from the novel contain elements from several periods of Soviet history, and the street on which the story takes place could be anywhere in the Soviet Union, though it is perhaps most like a street in Moscow.

Like any Soviet citizen with a little time to spare and some curiosity, Anna

## Imagination and hope

**OLGA GRUSHIN** is the author of two critically acclaimed novels, *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* and *The Line*. Both grapple with the legacy of the Soviet Union and the depths of human character. Raised in Moscow, Grushin was the first Soviet citizen to graduate from a U.S. university after the cold war. She now lives in Washington, D.C.

### Can you tell us something about your religious identity?

For the first 13 years of my life, religion was a very vague idea. I was reading constantly, and I came across the Bible when I was 12 or 13. I found myself completely fascinated. It was then that I decided that I wanted to study religion. I have a double major in religion and sociology.

At this point, I am very much an agnostic. My writing impulse comes from the search for meaning in life.

### What is the relationship between imagination and hope in your novels?

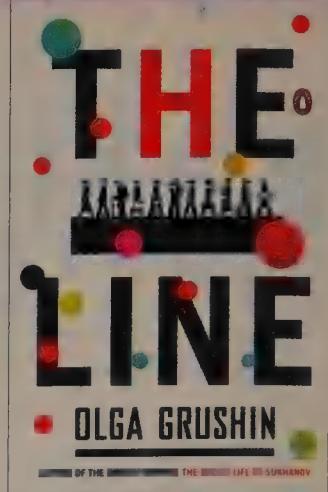
The way I conceived *The Line* at first was as a story of people in a bleak place hoping for some change in their lives. All the characters are waiting to hear music, but not just music for music's sake. The concert ticket is a way to other things—higher feelings or better places. Waiting becomes a kind of religious or artistic experience.

### Could you have set these novels somewhere else?

The stories that I am most interested in are basic, universal stories, but the Russian setting adds both a moral and a historical dimension. The characters are not just sacrificing their time. They are in danger. Issues of courage and betrayal play into the story, setting the ideas in bright relief against the tragic historical setting.

### What are the characters standing in line for?

When the line forms, they are all wondering what the line will be for. Maybe it will be coats; maybe it will be boots. That's a very Soviet moment. But quickly it becomes more. Each one believes that this ticket will transform their lives in a way that a simple concert really couldn't. The coming of Selinsky is almost like the coming of a savior. He will bring different things to different people according to their wishes.



**The Line**

By Olga Grushin

Penguin, 336 pp., \$16.00 paperback

joins the line to find out what is being sold. Maybe, she thinks, it will be cakes or stockings or "a ruby-red drop of nail polish in a square glass bottle, or a smooth pebble of jasmine soap." That day the kiosk does not open and the line disperses.

But it forms again the next day and the next, becoming a locus of a strange source of hope for the people who join it. Anna finds that her imagination and her largely inchoate longings are shaped by the line, and she is embarrassed to reveal to her family—her tuba-playing husband and her teenage son—that she is spending so much time in a line when she doesn't even know why.

Gradually, the purpose of the line is revealed: the people are waiting for one-to-a-customer tickets to see a concert given by Selinsky. Once the purpose of the line is known, Anna's elderly mother, who spends her days hidden in her room, emerges to ask Anna to acquire a ticket so she can attend this concert. More and more people join the line, and a complex form of community emerges.

Anna's husband, Sergei, who was deprived of his dream of becoming a great violinist when the government

decided he was too elitist, joins the line as well, with the intention of stealing the ticket for his own use. Their troubled teenage son, Alexander, also is cajoled into taking a turn standing in line. They occupy their place, number 137, day after day, night after night, through rumors, denunciations, despair and hope, waiting for the kiosk to open and tickets to be distributed.

Although waiting in line is drudgery, it also becomes a ritual infused with significance. While waiting, each character reflects on his or her dreams, needs, failures and disappointments. They imagine that acquiring a ticket will change their lives in some way that in reality is unlikely. They meet other people, make friendships, fall in love and become an unlikely and unshapely community. Over the course of the year, what they long for and what they imagine shifts and changes as they allow themselves to dream amidst the bleakness of Soviet Russia.

Under the rhythms of everyday life runs a current of dreamlike commentary in the form of Anna's mother's memories. Her words and thoughts provide the constant possibility of another way of

seeing the world, even as she remains paralyzed by her memories. Her recitations of memory infuse each of the characters, stimulate their imaginations and provide a commentary on seeing and seeking. They suggest that the interplay between what is real and what is imagined is significant in the formation of a complete life.

Grushin offers her characters the dignity of their dreams. Readers might be rooting for Sergei to wake up and take responsibility for his own life, but Grushin seems to respect his need to indulge in dreams and fantasies in order to find a form of salvation. She is not impatient with his restless searching, and she does not dictate an outcome. Likewise, Alexander wanders, finds bad company, endangers his family and yet gradually finds in himself and in relationships meaning and purpose. *The Line* has darkly absurdist elements: Is the line just a government plot? Will tickets appear suddenly in the middle of the night? Is waiting a hopeless enterprise? But in the end it is a hopeful novel, suggesting that the effort we make to create meaning is of value.

Many things make *The Line* a great novel. The prose is lush, sometimes verg-

#### Do you see other religious motifs in the book?

Hope and inward meaning can change your life from within, even though outwardly nothing changes. Initially, the people in line each want the ticket for themselves. But in the end, they each want the ticket to give to one another as a gift, an offering. It is their ticket to a place of higher feeling, even though outwardly it is the same place or even worse. I also gesture toward the idea of what the afterlife might be, but I don't think of the book as having a message. If the interpretations are all different, so much the better.

#### Your novels are written in English, but the reader can detect the influence of Russian. What impact does the Russian language have on your use of English?

I want to have a Russian cadence in my English. The English language that I read nowadays seems very stark, and that streamlined language has never been interesting to me. I'd like to infuse English with richness and use it in a way that is very much my own. The vocabulary in English is extraordi-



© TAMARA BECKWITH

Olga Grushin

nary, and English offers things that you can't do in Russian, but Russian is more fluid.

#### Are there any aspects of *The Line* that are based on personal experience?

When I was a student at Moscow State University, all freshman were sent for a month of hard labor. I worked as a salesperson in the coat section in Detskii Mir, a children's store. I was this wispy 17-year-old girl, and my job was to hold back the line. People would swarm into our section, and I had to keep them from taking all the coats.

I learned so much about lines: ways to cut in front, what people talk about in line, what people were feeling.

During perestroika, we started getting these wonderful exhibitions and concerts. In 1987, I waited for a full day to see Chagall's exhibit at the Pushkin Museum. Like Stravinsky, he was our own, yet we had never seen his works exhibited. The feeling in those lines was absolutely wonderful. Even though it was very tedious to wait for a day, you met people, you shared interests. Everyone was in line because they were waiting to see great art. It was a unique feeling. —AF

ing on dense, but the novel is worth taking the time required to appreciate the intricate images. It recalls the work of Russian writers like Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Bulgakov, who play with the nature of reality while exploring the heights and depths of the human spirit. Grushin writes in English but invokes and evokes the tradition of Russian literature. The language is rich, layered and unexpected.

The theological implications of the novel are understated but pressing. The act of waiting is a multilayered religious event; Selinsky is a provocative kind of "great hope" whose coming may or may not fulfill its promise; the people in line fill a liturgical function as they "sing" of both hope and need. The dilapidated and ill-used church at the end of the alley where the kiosk is located stands like a question mark at the end of a philosophical question. These layers, none didactic, invite readers to infuse the scenario with their own meaning.

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance

By Ferdinand Schlingensiepen  
T & T Clark, 472 pp., \$29.95

Dietrich Bonhoeffer continues to captivate the Christian imagination in the English-speaking world 65 years after his murder by the Nazi regime, but this does not mean that his life and thought are always well understood. Individuals from across the ideological spectrum have for years lifted his ideas and actions out of their time and place in history so they can conscript them for their own causes. Drawing parallels between the present and the past is wrought with difficulties in any discussion of a historical figure, and in the case of Bonhoeffer, a complex individual who lived in a turbulent and fragmentary time, it is particularly problematic.

One measure of a good biography is the degree to which it keeps this anachronistic tendency in check. When judged by this criterion, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen's new book is without peer. The author's knowledge of Bonhoeffer and his familiarity with the massive amount of research that has been done over the past 50 years are readily apparent, and they result in a clear and compelling picture of Bonhoeffer's life, work and witness.

As one of the founders of the International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Society and a pastor and theologian in his own right, Schlingensiepen is a natural choice to follow in Eberhard Bethge's footsteps as Bonhoeffer's premiere biographer. His father was principal at one of the Confessing Church seminaries, a personal connection to this contentious period in German history that adds to his detailed grasp of the principal sources. He was also a close friend of Bethge, who approached him early on about writing an abridged version of his classic biography. Given the passage of time and with new information coming to light since Bethge published his work, especially the correspondence between Bonhoeffer and his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, Schlingensiepen concluded that a fresh interpretation of Bonhoeffer's life and thought was needed.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that no one is ever more than the coauthor of one's own life story: each of us enters upon a stage that we did not design or build, there to find ourselves part of action that is not of our own making. Bonhoeffer is no exception, and Schlingensiepen excels at navigating through the many settings, characters and plots that converge to form the contours of this life. His facility in this regard is particularly important when he is narrating the convoluted twists and turns of the church struggle in the 1930s. German church polity, both then and now, differs significantly from the arrangement that Americans are used to, as does the relationship between the churches and the state. The failure to understand these differences has often led scholars and min-



Marcus Borg, Jacqui Lewis, Doug Bailey

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Reviewed by Barry Harvey, professor of theology at Baylor University.

isters on both sides of the ideological aisle to posit dubious contextual comparisons.

Schlingensiepen is equally masterful at relating the intimate relationships of Bonhoeffer's life, beginning with relationships with his family members, many of whom were also involved in the conspiracy against the Nazis. In addition, he is able to examine Bonhoeffer's relationship with Bethge, and he gives due credit to Bonhoeffer's close friend and dialogue partner. Finally, Schlingensiepen's account of Bonhoeffer's brief but lively courtship with von Wedemeyer, carried out largely by correspondence, is particularly winsome.

I would have liked to see Schlingensiepen reflect a bit further on Bonhoeffer's participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler in light of Bonhoeffer's friendship with Jean Lasserre at Union Seminary, his focus on the Sermon on the Mount in *Discipleship* and elsewhere, and his espousal of a peace ethic during his work with the ecumenical movement. James McClendon and others have made a compelling case that biography is an appropriate genre in which to do theology, and Schlingensiepen acknowledges that it is a legitimate aspect of the biographer's enterprise, noting in the preface that when Bethge published his book, Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance had to be defended to a German public that had yet to come to terms with its own behavior during the Nazi regime. Given that this defense is no longer necessary, it would seem that enough time has passed to inquire anew about Bonhoeffer's momentous decision to set aside what he had said and written before the war and cast his lot with those who sought to kill Hitler.

Raising these sorts of questions does not require that one either condone or condemn Bonhoeffer for his involvement in the resistance. What it does is to continue the very sort of theological reflection that he undertook regarding this decision in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. For example, Bonhoeffer raised the question of concrete success in the essay "After Ten Years." Judged by this (admittedly slippery) standard, the conspirators were

not successful: they did not bring down the Third Reich, they did not eliminate Hitler, and they did not appreciably shorten the war. Some have argued that they may even have made matters worse by providing the regime with convenient scapegoats for past military defeats and by inciting further its paranoid determination to fight on to the last. In short, the conspiracy failed to "seize the wheel," to use the aphorism that Bonhoeffer employed as he urged the Confessing Church to take action on behalf of the victims of an unjust state by bringing its apparatus to a halt.

McClendon suggests that the note of tragedy in Bonhoeffer's story is but an element in the greater tragedy of the Christian community in Germany—specifically, its failure over the years to cultivate institutions and practices that would have provided women and men with the necessary habits of mind and behavior to recognize and resist fascism. As Schlingensiepen carefully docu-

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ments, Bonhoeffer possessed those skills to an extraordinary degree and tried throughout the decade of the 1930s to foster them in the churches in Germany and in ecumenical circles, but to no avail. With the outbreak of the war, and in the absence of communal institutions and practices that would have made a distinctively Christian form of action possible, he became a victim in a tragic drama.

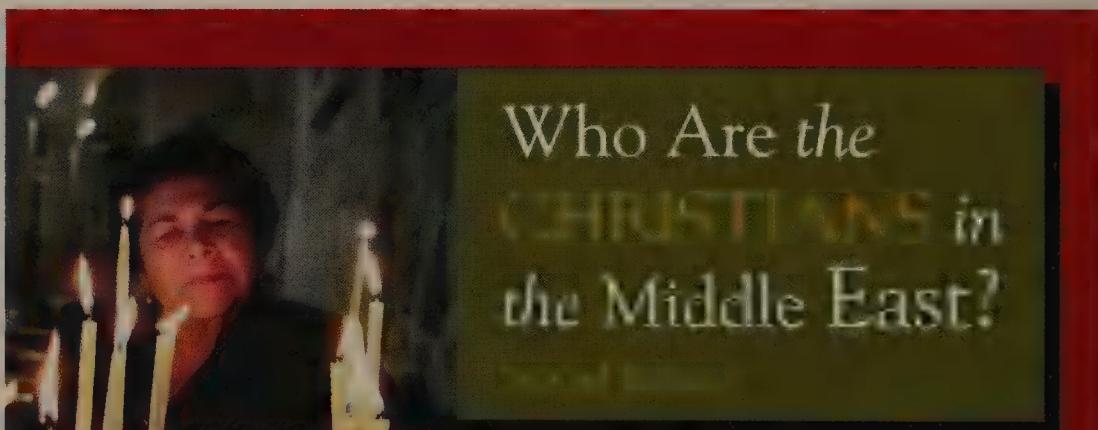
McClendon's interpretation has affinities with Schlingensiepen's comments about Bonhoeffer's frustrations with the shortcomings of the Confessing Church. Had he followed up on these comments and brought his own considerable experience and insight to bear on them, what is already a good biography could have been very good indeed. That said, we are in his debt for the good work that he has done, opening a new window into the remarkable life, witness and scholarship of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities

By Brett Webb-Mitchell  
Church Publishing, 160 pp., \$18.00 paperback

My former congregation prided itself on being warm and friendly. Then one Sunday Michael came to worship, and we discovered the limits of our welcome. Michael had Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder characterized by involuntary physical and vocal tics. At first, there were no signs of our visitor's disability; Michael seemed rather quiet. The real trouble started when I began to preach. Throughout the sermon, Michael screeched, chirped, shouted and cursed, much to the discomfort of the congregation—and the preacher.

After the service, there was an emotional debate about the visitor and his



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disruptive behavior. With a mixture of pity, fear and frustration, the church leaders wrestled with the question, "How can we welcome this man without ruining worship?" We couldn't agree on a workable solution, but in the end the question was moot: Michael never returned, much to our guilty relief.

Every congregation I've served has a Michael story, which is why Brett Webb-Mitchell's book *Beyond Accessibility* seems so promising. Webb-Mitchell's goal is to provide "a theological and practical approach for congregations, with clear, targeted strategies for full inclusion of all members" regardless of disability. For congregations striving to welcome all people—including the Michaels—such a resource would be a boon.

The book is divided into two parts: the theoretical and the practical. Webb-Mitchell begins by tracing in broad brushstrokes the sad history of the treatment of people with disabilities, a history that includes institutional isolation, awkward integration and separate accommo-

dation—even in the church. Turning his attention to scripture and theology, Webb-Mitchell then invites us to reimagine what it means to be the church, using Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ—which makes inclusion a necessity, not a choice. For if the church really is the body of Christ, then we all have to find ways to build up the body using whatever gifts or talents God has given each of us, regardless of ability. This is what it means to be an inclusive community.

In part two, Webb-Mitchell sets out to chart a practical course toward this inclusive community, a journey that begins with basic Christian hospitality and moves from mere accessibility to true acceptance. He argues that we who are members of faith communities need to rethink our approach to everything from worship to Christian education if we are going to do more than merely accommodate those with disabilities. We need to move beyond accommodation to cocreation in order to learn the gestures and practices that make us Christian.

Webb-Mitchell, a Presbyterian minister who has worked for and with people with disabilities, brings a great deal of passion and energy to this subject. His book contains some wonderful stories, and the last chapter offers a provocative description of what a church might look like if a faith community achieved full inclusion. The problem is that while Webb-Mitchell accurately describes many of the challenges of welcoming people with disabilities, he's less sure of the solutions.

Although part two is subtitled "The Practices," the reader will find few practical suggestions. Instead, Webb-Mitchell uses this section to make the case for Christian hospitality and full inclusion. I doubt that any congregation is against

*Reviewed by Shawnthea Monroe, senior minister of Plymouth Church UCC, Shaker Heights, Ohio, and coauthor of Living Christianity: A Pastoral Theology for Today.*



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JAMES C. BURKEE

Foreword by Martin E. Marty

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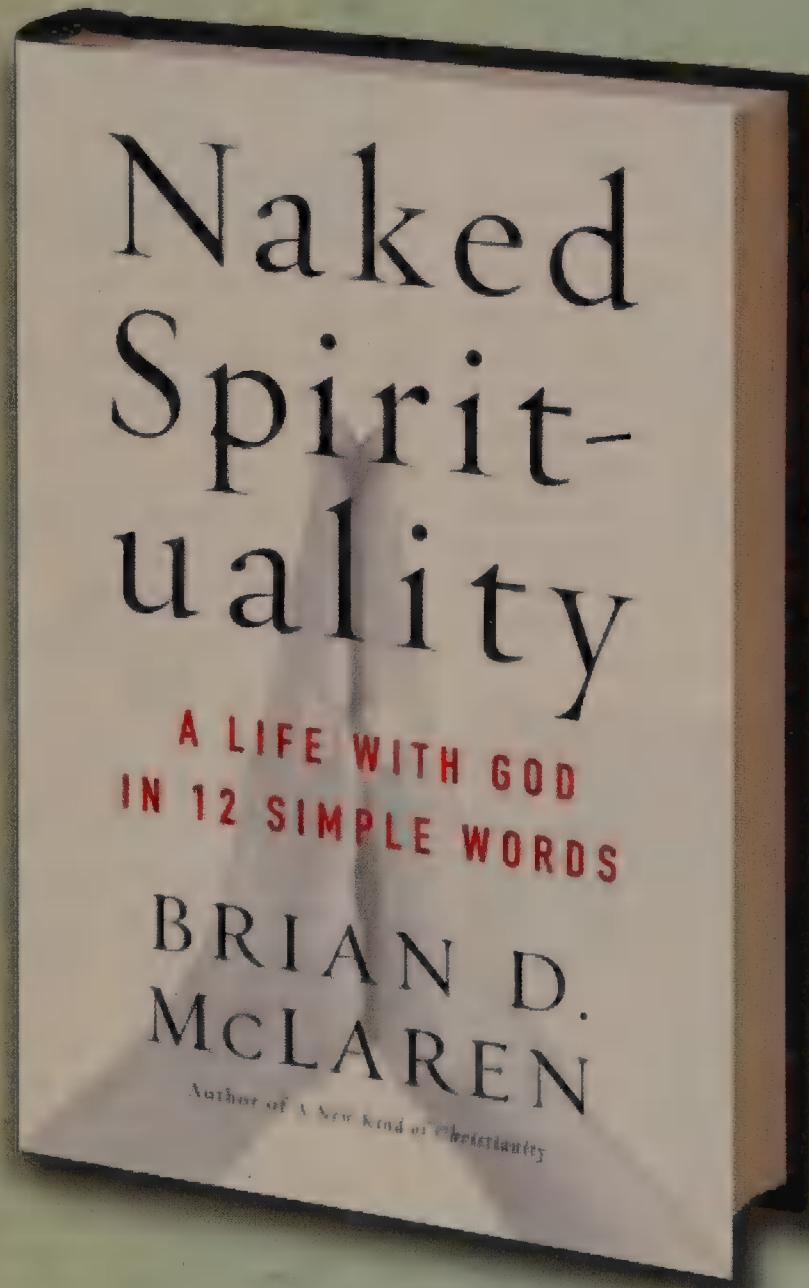
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extending hospitality to people with disabilities. The truth is we want to welcome and include the Michaels of the world; we just don't know how to do it.

Perhaps Webb-Mitchell would have offered more practical suggestions if he had brought people with disabilities into the conversation. The absence of their voice in the book is surprising since Webb-Mitchell is a strong advocate for including people with disabilities in every aspect of church life and community transformation. Of course, there is no question that Webb-Mitchell champions the cause of people with disabilities, but when it comes to nuance and specificity, there is no substitute for hearing from people who have had firsthand experience.

There are other notable absences. Webb-Mitchell doesn't refer to the work of well-known scholars like Nancy L. Eiesland and Thomas E. Reynolds, both of whom have written extensively in the field. Furthermore, the book needed to be more carefully edited; grammatical errors and typos abound and make for difficult reading.

*Beyond Accessibility* fails to live up to its promise. Webb-Mitchell gets this much right: communities of faith should strive to move beyond large-print bulletins and wheelchair ramps and toward full inclusion of people with disabilities. But if we're seeking specific, practical suggestions for incorporating all God's children—able and disabled—into the body of Christ, we'll need to look beyond this book.

## LETTERS

(Continued from page 6)

lights the dangers of naming elephants in rooms and perhaps points us to the importance of seeking to honor the limits of loved ones' abilities to experience elephant-naming as life-giving.

I see much to ponder in Rabbi Yehiel Poukpo's conviction that the purpose of the eulogy "is to draw a positive lesson or two from the deceased's life that others can use." I agree—while continuing to hope that we might include a grace-filled and delicate naming of shadows amid our understanding of what makes for positive lessons.

James Benedict integrates the various paths we can take at funerals with his apt citing of Dickinson. This makes space for the possibility that not to engage the elephant at all can cheapen positive lessons. But to name the elephant outright can dishonor the dead, who, as Rabbi Poukpo observes, "must be honored and treated with dignity and respect." To tell the truth slant may involve alluding obliquely yet still meaningfully to shadows. This can be a way to honor the dead and respect the living while simultaneously conveying that the good life is not so much the perfect one as the life lived in truth and with integrity, its beauty often shining forth from grace-wrapped intertwining of successes and messes.

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# ON Music

## Say Goodbye

By Liz Janes (Asthmatic Kitty)

Liz Janes calls her new album a soul album, but don't take this at face value. Her résumé—as a solo artist and in support of Sufjan Stevens and others—leans toward avant-folk. So it's no surprise that this isn't a straightforward salute to Memphis. Still, *soul* is as good a word as any for this quiet, strange but above all groovy little record.

A lot of the pleasure comes from Janes's rhythmically intense singing. She begins the blues-tinged ballad "Anchor" accompanied only by an acoustic guitar bass line, her voice carrying the piece for a whole minute before the band comes in. Similarly, on "Trees"—the album's high-energy point—she starts with just the vocal over long electric piano chords.

The album is full of vintage electric piano, played with an outside-the-box edge. Classic soul horn lines intrude delightfully into the low-key palette. The drums and upright bass recall Calexico or early Van Morrison as they move freely from subdued to jazzy to scatter-shot. A couple of experimental tracks function as welcome breaths between the song-driven material, not distractions from it.

What is distracting is the lyrics, some of which feature religious themes that are neither subtle nor evangelistic but just awkward. A melancholy love song that might be about God ("I Don't Believe") is a tired idea. Other songs offer theological truisms as their main hooks: "We are just creatures / We have been created" ("Trees"); "Time and space are constructs of grace" ("Time & Space").

Elsewhere, however, Janes's writing is more artful. And words aside, *Say Good-*



**AVANT-FOLK:** Liz Janes's latest work reflects an unusual blend of styles.

*bye* is one of the most pleasantly unusual records to come out in some time.

## Low Country Blues

By Gregg Allman (Rounder)

While the most tried-and-true way to say "I'm a serious American roots artist" is to book Emmylou Harris to sing backup, a close second is to get T-Bone Burnett to be your producer. If this Allman-Burnett collaboration is predictable, it's also terrific. The Gregg Allman name evokes southern rock's worst excesses, but the singer-keyboardist is deeply steeped in traditional blues as well—and the latter is what's on display in his first solo record in 14 years.

Most of the songs are classics by the masters who shaped Allman's work. The hotshot band features Dr. John on piano. As in most recent Burnett projects, the players find a warm, distinctive groove and then largely stay out of the way. That's great, because Allman sounds better than ever.

## Antifogmatic

By Punch Brothers (Nonesuch)

Debates between purists and progressives loom large in bluegrass, but this paradigm seems irrelevant to a sound this newfangled. The only traditional element these topflight pickers offer is instrumentation; the material is essentially highly adventurous pop songs. Nothing wrong with that, and a couple of

them ("Me and Us," "Welcome Home") find a baroque lushness in the acoustic timbres and voices.

But most of the tracks are disappointing. Some compositional restraint would help—the Punch Brothers' earlier contrapuntal meanderings are diminished, but the general complexity still overwhelms the listener. The larger issue, however, is the strict string-band framework itself: while it's fine to eschew traditionalism for intricate pop, playing the latter without a note of piano, percussion or anything plugged in just sounds kind of gimmicky.

## The Head and the Heart

By The Head and the Heart (Sub Pop)

This new band's sound has roots in the indie-folk scene, with its moody treatments of simple chord progressions and Americana rhythms. But the larger thread here is classic pop, and Seattle's The Head and the Heart offers the complete feel-good package: polished songwriting, ambitious style changes and especially tight harmonies—the three singers, unmemorable by themselves, blend their voices expertly and joyfully.

The band shows some instrumental chops as well, particularly Kenny Hensley. It's always great to hear a young band with a piano player who isn't just a guitarist who dabbles. Hensley's tasty playing drives a lot of the band's earthy-yet-breezy sound. As the days get warmer, this could be the record you can't stop playing.

**Hollywood Town Hall**  
**Tomorrow the Green Grass**  
By the Jayhawks (both reissued  
by Legacy/American)

Alt-country is typically traced to Uncle Tupelo, but the early '90s Jayhawks made better records. Where Uncle Tupelo found scrappy affinities between traditional Americana and punk, the Jayhawks brought '70s country-rock to the alt-rock '90s: country songwriting and harmony, rock-and-roll energy, soulful groove. *Green Grass* is also the best album-length application of a major alt-country insight: the dark, socially aware lyrics are all the more heartbreaking when set to sunny music.

Both albums have just been reissued, each with a handful of also-rans and live tracks. *Green Grass* comes with a second disc of acoustic demos. The highlight here is the singing. While the band's sound is hard to pin down, Mark Olson and Gary Louris's vocals display classic country close harmony, mutually sensitive at every turn.

—Steve Thorngate



They are like  
trees planted  
by streams  
of water...

Psalm 1:3

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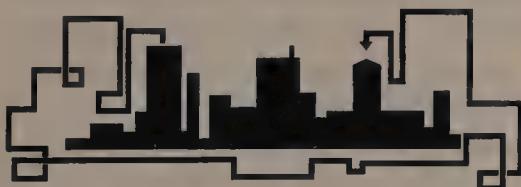
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**Blue Valentine**  
Directed by Derek Cianfrance  
Starring Michelle Williams and Ryan Gosling

**M**arriage is a juicy topic for filmmakers, but few movies get made about happy ones. More common is the dissection of a once-happy union that is coming apart at the seams. The reasons for its demise usually involve such dramatic standbys as infidelity, illness or death, though a few directors with a more pronounced tragic vision have upped the ante by zeroing in on festering hatred (think John Cassavetes) or gut-wrenching psychological cruelty (a specialty of Ingmar Bergman).

Derek Cianfrance's *Blue Valentine* is also about the last gasps of a once-happy marriage, but there is a surprising lack of heavy dramatic conflict at its core. In the six years that Dean (Ryan Gosling) and Cindy (Michelle Williams) have been together, there hasn't been any ugly betrayal, big lie or major life change. Instead, all of the pressure is coming from within: they are six years older than when they first took their vows, and one of them has changed more than the other.

That would be Cindy, whose natural intelligence is starting to feed her latent ambition. She is a well-respected nurse at a small medical center, where she has opportunities for advancement. But her dreams of a better life with greater challenges are being thwarted by Dean, who never graduated high school, has gone from being a furniture mover to being a house painter and seems indifferent to the ladder of success. Dean adores Cindy, is a terrific father to their daughter and possesses a sense of humor and sweetness of spirit that most women would kill for in a husband. But he also drinks too much beer in the morning.



**FLOUNDERING:** Young married couple Dean (Ryan Gosling, left) and Cindy (Michelle Williams) are falling out of love without the aid of betrayal, deception or life change.

(When Cindy complains that if he didn't drink that early he could find a better job, Dean retorts that he's grateful to have a job that allows him to drink in the morning.)

Using an ambitious flashback structure, *Blue Valentine* chronicles how Dean and Cindy met and fell in love—and how, six years later, they are trying to find the common ground that will keep them together. That's difficult, since the ground keeps shifting.

Dean thinks they need to reclaim the spontaneity and sexuality of their early years, when their love for each other was more than enough to overcome barriers. Cindy no longer thinks that is sufficient, longing instead for a more stable environment in which to thrive and survive. Dean seems to be the better parent, Cindy the better spouse. All these differences and the pain they bring on come to a head during a long night in the "future room" of a ridiculous sex motel that Dean insists they go to, where they strip down both physically and emotionally to hash things out.

The film stumbles a bit in the third act, in which Cianfrance resorts to some overly melodramatic moments to carry the

movie to its conclusion—scenes that feel crudely imposed on this otherwise understated story. But even these dips in the road are salvaged thanks to the masterful performances by Gosling and Williams. Dean's gentleness and unsullied love for his wife and daughter are heartbreakingly, thanks in large part to Gosling's ability to convey the confusion that defines him. Williams, who is fast becoming a major American actress, proves expert at expressing Cindy's anguish as she confronts childhood pain, bad decisions and the fact that she is falling out of love with a man she still wants to love.

By the end of *Blue Valentine*, some viewers will find themselves rooting for the marriage to survive a few more rounds. Others may find themselves hoping that Dean and Cindy walk away from each other before the wounds get too deep. Your reaction may speak not only to your feeling about the characters and the film but also to your own sense of what marriage represents—and how tightly you would hold on if it started to blow away.

Reviewed by John Petrakis, who teaches screenwriting in Chicago.

by Philip Jenkins

For all the crises and confrontations that the United States faces around the world, some observers think that the most alarming situation of all might be on our own doorstep. Back in 2008, the U.S. Joint Forces Command warned that both Mexico and Pakistan might suffer "rapid and sudden collapse." If Mexico did succumb to its escalating drug wars, that would leave a classic failed state of 110 million people just across the Rio Grande. That figure does not count some 25 million people of Mexican heritage in the U.S.

Whether or not we can realistically talk of state collapse, the Mexican situation is serious. Drug-related violence has claimed some 30,000 lives since 2006, and large areas of the country are under the effective control of one or more of the notorious cartels, gangs and militias. Few weeks go by without the media reporting some massacre of innocents, and police and government officials are regularly targeted.

Lost in most discussions of the crisis is the role of the churches. This in practice means above all the Roman Catholic Church, which theoretically claims the loyalty of at least 80 percent of the population. (Around 6 percent of Mexicans are Protestant.) Although Mexico maintains a strict separation of church and state, nobody denies the enormous role of Catholicism in Mexican society and culture.

How have Christians coped

with the horror of living through a virtual civil war? In many instances, clergy and believers have lived up to their ideals. They have behaved heroically, striving to make peace between factions, trying to fulfill social needs in regions where secular government has all but abdicated its power. Individual priests and bishops comfort bereaved families and preach bravely against violence and criminality, at grave risk to their lives. Fearless activism for peace and human rights made Saltillo's legendary bishop José Raúl Vera López a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Some senior clergy propose long-term solutions for the crisis. Although he is a staunch social and theological conservative, the head of the Mexican church, Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, has opened the door to reforming Mexico's drug laws, suggesting that the issue must be reframed as a public health problem rather than a matter for the criminal law.

But for all the zeal of such leaders, the drug crisis has exposed some alarming weaknesses in the church, as a traditionally poor society has faced the overwhelming temptations of drug money. One emerging crisis in the church concerns the poor parishes that receive offers of vast gifts from local magnates known to be *narcotraffi-*

*cantes*. Although Cardinal Rivera Carrera declares that the church should never accept such dirty money, it is no secret that many priests have used drug money to rebuild churches and launch social welfare projects. This concession obviously compromises their ability to speak out against crime, mayhem and terrorism.

Even more troubling is what the crisis has revealed about the content of the beliefs of many ordinary people—perhaps several millions in all—who unhesitatingly describe themselves as Christian and Catholic but who in fact follow a twisted caricature of orthodox faith, in which religion is wholly separated from morality. Through the centuries, the Mexican church made many compromises with native beliefs, assimilating traditional gods and spiritual beings into the roster of Christian saints, and most observers would applaud these policies as successful examples of inculturation. In some cases, though, poor believers went much further in developing their own alternate and unauthorized forms of folk Catholicism, centered on evil or criminal entities. Whereas these cults were once practiced in the shadows, the drug crisis has brought them into

the light, as arrests have revealed that these faiths are practiced among criminals and the underclass.

One terrifying symbol is the skeletal figure of La Santa Muerte, Saint Death, who serves as the gangs' patron saint. As Andrew Chesnut describes in his forthcoming book *Devoted to Death* (Oxford University Press), Santa Muerte is condemned by the official church but worshiped in countless clandestine shrines. Nor is she the only manifestation of a subversive pseudo-Catholicism that veers close to outright diabolism. Another wildly popular folk saint is the 19th-century bandit Jesús Malverde, "angel of the poor," patron of drug dealers and illegal migrants. Devotees of San Juan Soldado (Soldier John) venerate a man executed in 1938 for raping and murdering an eight-year-old girl. While such beliefs demonstrate a profound faith in spiritual realities, they also show the yawning gulf that separates popular practice from any traditional concept of Christian faith.

If and when Mexico regains social and political stability, the churches should take their proper share of the credit. At that point, the clergy will also need to confront the deep spiritual crisis that has become so evident.

*Philip Jenkins's Notes from the Global Church appears in every other issue.*

## Mexico's crisis of faith

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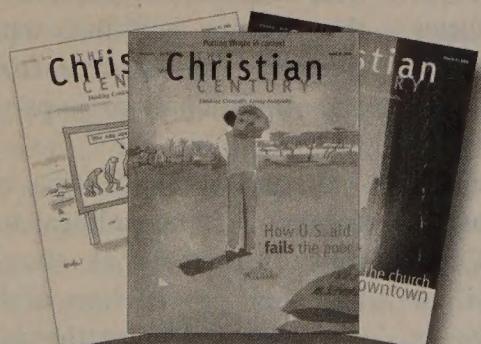
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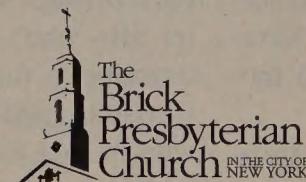
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PHOTO BY KEN WOISARD

***Holy Trinity*, by Holly Meade**

How to comprehend the Holy Trinity? Reflecting on her woodblock and linoleum print, Holly Meade writes, "Well, there is no comprehending the Holy Trinity. And picturing the Holy Trinity? That's not to be either. On the other hand, we've all been given imagination, and a sense of wonder and play. And so here they are, as colorful, holy personalities compelled forward on our behalf—lovely, watchful, tireless." Best known for illustrating children's books (she was awarded a Caldecott Honor), Meade has recently turned to printmaking. "Printing with woodblocks is a somewhat indirect path to take to arrive at an image. In spite of this, it frequently results in images of great immediacy." This indirect path and great immediacy meet in *Holy Trinity*, which unites artistic medium and an energetic sense of spirit, presence, being and the personhood of God.

—Lil Copan

**Correction:** In displaying the image of Elisa D'Arrigo's *Recollection . . . yellow (1)* in the February 22 issue, we failed to note that it was reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Elizabeth Harris Gallery, a private collection in New York.

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